

Adachi^{and} Shimamura

2
NOVEL



WRITTEN BY
Hitoma Iruma

ILLUSTRATED BY
Non



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Adachi^{and} Shimamura

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NOVEL

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A young woman with brown hair and large, expressive eyes is swimming in a pool. She is wearing a black one-piece swimsuit and a yellow swim cap with goggles perched on top. Her arms are extended forward in a swimming motion. The water is a vibrant blue with many small, shimmering light particles floating around her. The background is a bright, hazy blue, suggesting sunlight filtering through the water.

"Since we have no way of knowing who's right...I'll challenge you to a contest."

"A contest?"

"If I win, you have to go home and act like a real mom to your daughter, just for one day."

"Is this how kids these days get their kicks?"

"Something like that."

Shimamura
Goes to the Gym

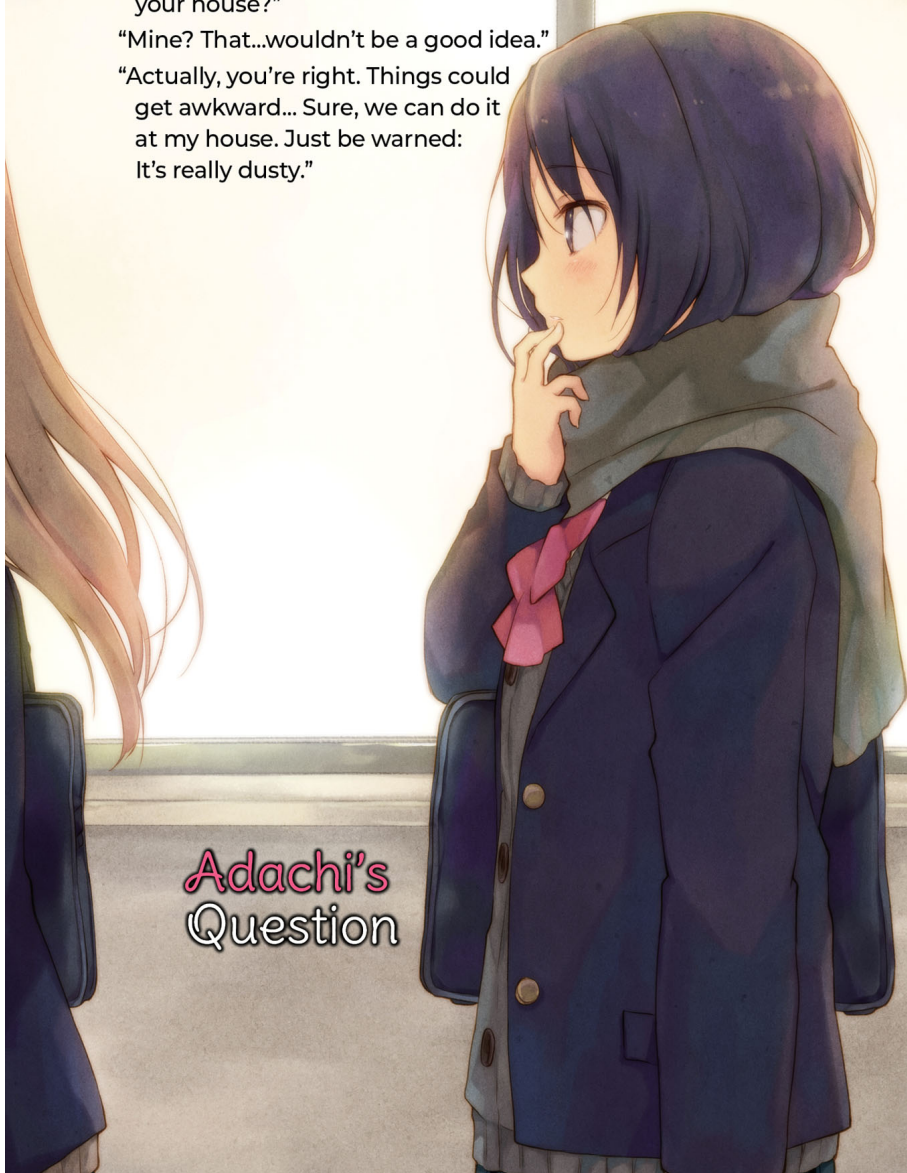
"Can't we just do it at...your house or whatever?"

"What? But it'll be dusty! What about your house?"

"Mine? That...wouldn't be a good idea."

"Actually, you're right. Things could get awkward... Sure, we can do it at my house. Just be warned: It's really dusty."

Adachi's
Question





"One person throws it, and
then the other can go
fetch it! Y'know?"

"I think you're thinking
of a Frisbee."

"Let's just try it out,
all right?"

Holiday Planning
with Shimamura



"Do you come here a lot?"

"Often enough, I guess."

"I bet a cup of that would
warm you right up."

Holiday Planning
with Adachi



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Seven Seas Entertainment

ADACHI TO SHIMAMURA VOL. 2

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Chapter 1: Shimamura Goes to the Gym

“**C**AN YOU DO a sit-up?”

About two minutes after I sent this email, right as I was getting ready to leave, I got a call from Adachi, the recipient of said email. I peered out of my room and down the hall to find that my mother was still wandering around the house. Evidently, I still had a few minutes to spare. Adjusting the strap of my gym bag, I picked up.

“Care to explain this email you sent me?” she demanded.

“What? I was just curious if you could do a sit-up, that’s all.”

I leaned against the wall near the door. Frankly, I hadn’t expected her to call me, and now I didn’t really know what to say—my usual reaction to phone calls.

Someone once told me it wasn’t normal to be so self-conscious about it. Maybe they were right.

“Well, let’s see...” Her voice grew faint; then, after a few moments, she returned. “Did it.”

How very dutiful of you.

“Uh, hello? I did it...?”

“Way to go.” Cradling my phone against my shoulder, I gave her a round of applause, but deep down I was kind of hoping she’d suck at it like I did. Misery loves company, after all. “To be honest, I can’t do sit-ups unless someone else is around to hold my feet down,” I confessed.

“Really?”

“Really really.”

I stroked my stomach. I wasn’t overweight, but I wasn’t exactly toned, either. *Wait, but then how do I get out of bed in the morning? Weird.* Incidentally, my little sister could do sit-ups just fine. Probably the boobs weighing me down, if anything.

“Okay, well...is that all?”

“Yep, that’s all I wanted to know! See ya.”

I hung up the phone, then shook my head in exasperation. What was the point of that call? Maybe I should've thought of something else to say...but what? And even if I *did* have more to say, would *she* have anything to say in response? Probably not. She was generally the quiet type, like me. Plus, I was already on my way out the door.

Somehow it felt like I was making excuses for something, but I couldn't quite tell what it was I felt so guilty about. Or maybe I was just overthinking it. *Why do I always get so worked up over nothing?*

"We're leaving!" my mother called.

And so I accompanied my mother to the gym that afternoon—willfully, but not enthusiastically, if that makes sense.

Our local sports gym was only open to members eighteen and older. That said, minors could get in if they had a free one-day trial voucher. And since my mother was a member, she could purchase these vouchers at a discount, which she did. Then she gave one to me for some reason, so I figured *Eh, why not? I'll give it a try.*

I had no real reason for doing it; I simply had nothing better to do, and I was bored. If I stayed at home, I knew I'd end up either studying or dealing with my sister. Hence, I decided maybe my time was better spent getting a little exercise instead of sitting around and zoning out. Not that a single day of working out would do much in the long run, of course.

Our family only had one bicycle, and my mother didn't approve of riding double, so instead we had my father drop us off in his car. Once we crossed the big bridge in the shopping district and passed the public sports field, a pale off-white sign came into view, its color reminiscent of Pocari Sweat, announcing the name of the gym in English rather than Japanese.

There were two parking lots: one on the left-hand side across the street from the gym, and another located to the right of the entrance. Both were absolutely brimming with cars. *I guess a lot of people are bored today.*

My father pulled up to the entrance and stopped the car. Once my

mother and I hopped out, he drove off without even saying goodbye. My mother had invited him to join us, but apparently he had no intention of taking her up on that. Supposedly his company's yearly physical exam had given him a clean bill of health, so he didn't "need" to exercise. *I'm pretty sure you're supposed to exercise no matter what, Dad.*

"Come on! Let's go!" my mother called as she stretched her shoulders in a circular motion.

"Coming," I replied as I followed after her.

My gym bag was a hand-me-down from my mom, and it was downright *riddled* with holes and dirt stains. One end sagged lower than the other, its corresponding strap completely stretched out. I held it up with one hand as we entered.

The automatic doors slid open to reveal a lobby with a reception desk. Seated there were two female employees, each wearing a white track jacket. My mother approached one of them and handed over her membership card; likewise, I approached the other one and showed her my voucher. In return, she gave me a blue wristband with a numbered key attached. My number (locker number, maybe?) was 83—I paused for a moment to contemplate whether "83" held any significance to me, but it didn't. Nor could I think of any numbers that *did* mean something to me.

"Would you like an overview of our facilities?" the receptionist asked.

"No thank you," I answered. I wasn't exactly eager to stand around and listen to her talk for however long.

Instead, we walked around to the glass door on the left side of the reception desk. On the other side, in the distance, I could see a tennis court filled with middle-aged women batting a bright yellow tennis ball back and forth, as well as even more women sitting on the sidelines to watch. Did they all know each other? Was this some kind of exclusive "forty-somethings" women's tennis team?

Nearby, I noticed a series of round sofa seats, all of them occupied by other middle-aged adults, and it was then that I noticed the weird age demographic. Sure, I wasn't expecting any fellow minors to be here, given the membership age requirement, but where were all the twenty- or thirty-somethings? My mother was right—almost everyone here was forty-plus. *I wonder what the age statistics look like for this place.*

We passed by a little sporting goods shop on our way to the shoe lockers, where we took off our outdoor shoes. As for my mother, she left without me and never looked back. This encapsulated my mother in a nutshell.

I walked over to locker #83 on the left-hand side, opened it, and stored my shoes inside. Then I headed up the stairs to the second floor, where I found myself surrounded by gym equipment of all different kinds, all of it raven-black in color. Now *this* was my idea of a gym.

There were ten treadmills lined up in a row along the wall, each operating at a different speed and incline as determined by their (middle-aged) users. Each one had a mini-TV built into it, and everyone was tuned in to the same daytime soap opera. Inside a different room on the far side, I could see a group of older ladies doing aerobics.

I turned and headed for the women's locker room. Then I felt the treadmill grandpas all turn to look at me, and I bit back the urge to snap at them.

Inside the locker room, I stuffed my gym bag into my assigned locker, changed into my workout clothes, and tied my hair back in a lazy ponytail. Somehow I managed to get dressed faster than my mother, despite her sizeable head start, so I stopped by to let her know where I was headed before I left. Some other guests had lined up to weigh themselves on the scale by the door, but I ignored it and speed-walked out.

Returning to the equipment room on the second floor, I noticed a large mat laid out on the floor in the far right-hand corner, where a small group of women were lying on their backs, legs swinging in the air, inflatable plastic balls of varying sizes clutched between their thighs. I could already feel the ab workout from here. For some reason it struck me as the sort of exercise Hino would be good at.

As with the first floor, the second floor had its own sporting goods shop selling shirts and yoga mats and anything else anyone could possibly want to buy at a gym. Frankly, I respected the hustle. If only I could be as passionate about something as these people were about selling me stuff... I just couldn't imagine what that would look like.

As I stood around contemplating my next move, one of the treadmill people stopped their machine and hopped off. Out of sheer curiosity, I decided to give it a try. I picked the settings at random and started running.

Naturally, this only lasted for about thirty seconds, at which point I slowed the pace to a walk. *That* lasted for a good five or so minutes, then I stopped the machine and stepped off. My sides were killing me, but I made sure not to let it show on my face.

“Whew! What a workout.”

“Lazybones!”

Out of nowhere, my mother smacked me upside the head. When did she get here? Her wrist snap technique was on point. *Ow. Must be all the sports.*

“Now I understand why your grades are so bad...”

She proceeded to pretend-cry, even going so far as to “wipe her tears” with the sleeve of her workout shirt. Personally, I didn’t see what being out of shape had to do with my grades at all. *I guess she wants me to put in more effort?*

“Do try to set a good example, all right? You’re one of the very few young people to ever visit this place.”

“What’s my age have to do with anything?” *We’re surrounded by a bunch of elderly men who can bench-press, for God’s sake.*

“You’ve been such a sloth from the day you were born...or were you? No, I think you were,” my mother nodded to herself. *How do you not remember what I was like as a child? You’re my mom!*

Then again, even I couldn’t really remember what I used to be like. Not to the point that I could explain it to someone else, at least—just bits and pieces here and there. One thing I could remember for sure, however, was that my teachers never wrote anything interesting on my report cards. For our graduation essays we had to go around asking our teachers for comments about us, and hoo boy, was that ever awkward. *Come to think of it, I can’t even remember what they said.*

“Now here’s how you’re supposed to use this thing!”

My mother stepped onto the treadmill, set the pace and incline ridiculously high, and started running at full speed. Amused, I decided to watch and see how long she’d last.

“So tell me, little sloth, are you actually going to school?” she asked me as she ran. Meanwhile, she tapped around on the mini-TV. Always the multi-tasker, this one. Personally, I wasn’t excited to be having this conversation right now.

“What are you talking about? You’ve *seen* me put on my uniform every morning.”

“So? That doesn’t mean anything.”

Her eyes narrowed sharply as her gaze bored mercilessly into my skull. The more she looked at me, the guiltier I felt, even though I literally hadn’t done anything wrong—I honestly did go to school every day! *I guess moms are just that intimidating.*

“Yes, I’m going to school, okay?” Leaning up against the treadmill handlebars, I pretended to “get distracted” by the show on her TV.

My mother and I hardly ever talked one-on-one, not that I particularly lamented that fact. I was now so uncomfortable, I was starting to wish I hadn’t come with her. The quintessential teenage experience, I supposed.

Meanwhile, she was still running at a steady, vigorous pace—perfect posture, perfect form. *Way to make me look like a loser, Mom.*

“If you don’t stay in school, you’ll ruin your life. Plus the lives of everyone around you.” Apparently she didn’t believe a word I said. Classic mom stuff. “Didn’t I raise you not to be a burden on other people?”

“Yes, Mom, I know.”

Great, now she’s lecturing me. Was that why she brought me here? I thought back to the time I heard her “jokingly” tell my sister “Don’t end up like your *onee-chan*.” The memory made me laugh in spite of myself.

In my head, I knew she was only worried about me because she cared about me...but I wasn’t yet mature enough to admit that she was right. I pushed myself away from the treadmill.

“Where are you going?”

“Gonna go do some other exercise, then hang out in the pool for a while.”

“Wimp.”

She kept on running, so I waved goodbye to her and got out of there. After all, the prospect of lounging in the pool was, in fact, my entire motivation for coming here.

Once I finished what I felt was a reasonable amount of exercise, I returned to the women’s locker room.

I hadn't even been trying all that hard, but somehow my face and back were both dripping with sweat, and my upper arms hurt. I had intentionally chosen abdominal workouts—in the hopes of getting myself to the point where I could do sit-ups unassisted—and as a result, my sides ached, too. Maybe I did too much of that thigh-ball thing.

I hadn't done any warmup stretches beforehand, so I already knew I was going to be sore tomorrow. Or maybe I'd get lucky and my young teenage body would bounce back from it! I decided to stay optimistic.

Back at my locker, I dug around in my gym bag, retrieved my swimsuit, and changed into it. Nothing special, of course, just your standard-issue school swim uniform. For a high-schooler like me who no longer had free time for beach vacations with the family, it was the best I had on hand.

Next I put on my swim cap, which proved to be more of a struggle than I'd anticipated. *Ugh, my hair's getting long again.* On my way out of the locker room, I passed a group of older women on their way in. I left through the other door and headed for the pool.

Instantly, the pungent smell of chlorine greeted me—so overwhelming, in fact, it made my high school pool seem like tap water by comparison. Even in November, the scent never failed to remind me of summer. Groaning in pain, I eased myself down the dimly lit stairs until I reached the door at the bottom, where the light from the pool room was shining in.

I slid the door open, and right as I stepped inside, they stopped me to spray my feet with disinfectant. I was expecting it to be cold, like it was at school, but instead it was room-temperature. That caught me off-guard, actually. After a quick shower, I wandered over to the pool.

"I'm so glad I joined... Heh heh heh... Sometimes I surprise myself with my own brilliance."

The sudden voice made me jump. I peered down over the cinder-block wall to find a twenty-something guy sitting there. He had blond hair, a smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose, and a big goofy grin on his face...as he watched the young girls learning to swim in the far right-hand lane of the pool.

Yikes.

He was by no means ugly, but he had a creepy vibe. By which I mean he was smiling wistfully at a swimming class for children. Then

he noticed me looking at him and met my gaze.

Yikes!

His affectionate expression vanished in an instant, replaced by a blank canvas, like someone who had grown bored of staring out the window. Judging from the conspicuous contrast in his enthusiasm levels, he was either a big fan of kids in general or a sex pervert. Not sure which.

“Whoops.”

With that, he turned back to the swim class like he was unwilling to miss even a single second. *Okay, yeah, this guy’s a pervert. I’d better keep my distance.* I promptly walked off.

Using the set of stairs and the handrail provided in the left corner of the pool, I stepped down into the water. The far-left lane was apparently reserved for water walking exercises: A bunch of old people were wading back and forth in a perfect circuit, like the world’s weirdest parade. I joined the procession.

This was a heated pool, and considering I had just worked up a sweat with all that exercise, I found myself wishing the water was a bit colder. The smell of chlorine intensified as I lowered myself down to my chin.

Once again, as with earlier, everyone was staring at me—and no, I wasn’t imagining it. Was it because I was wearing a school swimsuit? Or just because I was a high-schooler in general? Maybe some people enjoyed this sort of attention, but I was not one of them. If anything, I only cursed myself for being naïve enough to join in. They were staring at me because I stuck out. I didn’t belong here.

Crouched down with my chin in the water, I toddled along sluggishly. In the next lane over, an elderly man swam past me; the ripples from his motions sent water into my nose and mouth. Wiping my face, I straightened my posture. There was no point in trying to hide.

Part of me wished I could have invited Adachi along, but on the other hand, I knew she wasn’t the type to have fun at a place like this. As far as I could remember, I’d never seen Adachi enjoy herself in a setting as public as this one. *And I don’t think she’s ever attended pool day in gym class, either.*

As I shuffled along with the grandmas and grandpas, I suddenly spotted the pedophile from earlier diving into the lane immediately adjacent to the swim class on the far right-hand side. Compared to the beginner swimmers, he seemed far more skilled, or perhaps just comfortable in the water. He was even wearing goggles. Not only that, but this pedo was pretty darn fast, too. Or maybe he just *seemed* fast by comparison, considering the competition in these parts.

He swam front crawl style, zipping over to the far end of the pool. There, he flipped his feet up, kicked off from the wall, and headed back in the opposite direction. It was pretty entertaining, actually.

The more I watched, however, the more I started to notice something...weird...with his form. Specifically his neck. *Hmm*. I slid my goggles on and peered under the water to observe him. That was where I determined the problem: he wasn't rotating his head at all.

Oh, I get it.

He was still watching the girls. Constantly. Even while swimming at full speed.

Yeah, this guy is a pedo with a capital P. Seriously, bro, do us all a favor and at least pretend to be normal, would you?

Then again, perhaps an outside observer would see me as every bit as strange as I saw him. Maybe it was all a matter of perspective...

But on second thought, at least I'm not a pedophile. Yeah, I'd better give him a wide berth.

As I waded along, I noticed that one of the other lanes had become available, so I decided to retreat there. It was labeled "sprint training" and was clearly meant for competitive swim practice, but I ignored that detail and floated out on my back, my arms and legs spread wide like I was making a snow angel.

Then I slid my goggles onto my forehead—not like I was actually planning to swim, after all. Looking up at the ceiling, I could almost pretend they weren't all staring at me. But the fluorescent lights were too bright, so I squeezed my eyes shut, redirecting my focus to the gentle rocking of the waves. With my eyes closed, it felt more like I was floating in an empty void.

Over the waves, I could hear my mother's voice: *Don't cause trouble*. This was the one lesson she ingrained in me more than any

other, because she knew any trouble I *did* cause would find its way back to the rest of the family.

Was I causing trouble for anyone by floating here? Just by enjoying a brief escape from gravity? Same thing with all the classes I skipped—after suffocating for so long, was it such a crime to come up for air every now and then? My presence in the classroom was hardly mandatory; class would simply go on without me. As such, I personally didn't see the harm in it.

But my mother, on the other hand, was afraid it meant I'd grow up to be a loser. To her, this was unacceptable. She very much wanted me to leave the nest when the time came. In that regard, I had absolutely no freedom to decide my own path.

I generally saw myself as a decent student, but apparently I was still nothing more than an irresponsible child—to the adults, at least.

I opened my eyes and slid my goggles back on. Then I relaxed even more, letting my body sink beneath the waves as I exhaled all the breath in my lungs. Now I was free from the natural buoy that tethered me to the surface. Watching the bubbles float up in my wake, I descended further and further until my back touched the pool floor—a wide expanse of aqua blue to match the wall of water above me. The shade reminded me of the label on Adachi's favorite mineral water.

Here I was, alone in a world of color and refracted light. Coupled with the peaceful sounds of the waves, I was in heaven. My goggles were watertight, and yet my eyes felt a little damp.

The only downside to this paradise was that I could only visit by emptying my lungs, and my lungs were not generally a fan of being empty. Reluctantly, I heeded the discomfort in my chest and rose back to the surface. Right as I took a breath, however, I felt a sudden shove against my stomach, pushing the air right back out again. Down to the bottom I went.

This time, however, I landed on my feet and kicked back up to the surface. There, I witnessed the culprit: *my own mother*, laughing like a woman crazed as she dashed away from the scene of her crime, kicking up water as she ran like some kind of *kappa* monster. Not that I'd actually seen a *kappa*, but you get what I mean. Like a comedic antagonist in a gag manga.

"Oh, grow up," I grumbled, but otherwise kept my opinion of her

behavior to myself. I followed her out of the pool, pulled off my swim cap, and contemplated my next move. *Maybe I'll go see what's on the other side.*

As it turned out, the opposite end of the pool room was home to the men's and women's shower rooms as well as an indoor Jacuzzi, which was currently exuding steam like some kind of hot spring. The sign on the door nearby indicated there was another separate Jacuzzi outside, but when I peeked out there I found my mother lounging in it, so I decided to go somewhere else.

Adjacent to the outdoor Jacuzzi door were two different types of sauna: a "mist sauna" and a "steam room." I could feel considerable heat radiating from both. Since I was here, I figured I may as well try one of them out—I just wasn't sure which one. Not like I'd ever been in a sauna before.

As I stood around cradling my newly acquired blue seat cushion, a middle-aged woman passed by me on her way into the steam room. As I glanced at her, I was struck with a bizarrely gripping sense of *déjà vu*. Suddenly I couldn't tear my eyes away. Then she noticed me looking at her and stopped short for some reason.

She wasn't wearing a swim cap. Evidently, she was just here for the sauna. Her hair was dark, and her features suggested she was about my mom's age. *Who does she remind me of?*

Then she spoke.

"I don't like this."

Contrary to what her words suggested, her tone was playful, but this didn't ring any particular bells.

"You want to know why I come to this gym full of old fogies? To feel young by comparison! Ignoring the little kids who come here for tennis or swim lessons, obviously. But now you're here, stealing my spotlight? How am I supposed to gloat now?"

I laughed awkwardly. Apparently she was jealous of my youth or something. No one had ever complained to my face about my age before, so that was...refreshing? Kind of?

"Oh, I'm just messing with you. It's just not often we see any teenagers around here, that's all."

"Yeah, I bet," I replied. Then I gasped slightly as the realization

hit me. Looking at her face in profile, I knew *exactly* who she reminded me of.

Just then, another older woman walked out of the sauna and called out to her, instantly confirming my suspicions.

“Hey there, Adachi-san! Didn’t know you were here. You know, you can hang out in the sauna all you want, but you won’t lose any weight!”

“Oh, mind your own business!”

Now there was a name I recognized all too well. And as Yashiro would put it, this felt like *destiny*.

Never had I imagined I would encounter Adachi’s mother in a place like this. Small world, indeed—or was it fate?

I sat hunched over in the steam room, eyeing Mrs. Adachi and ruminating on how awkward it was to interact with mothers in general.

Adachi never liked to talk about her parents. She always clammed up the second the topic arose. That much wasn’t all that unusual for people my age, but in her case, I could tell there was a bit more going on than your usual teenage rebellion. While the rest of us could admit to caring about our families at least a little, Adachi regarded hers with icy contempt. What she didn’t seem to realize, however, was that the smallest spark of emotion would heat things right back up again.

“...and I tell you, that other coach is a *terrible* teacher!”

“I know, right? I like the other one. He has a nice voice.”

Mrs. Adachi was now sitting with some other lady, both of them sweating up a storm as they chatted away. As they compared the male tennis instructors, I was reminded of the way the girls at my school talked about boys. Also similar to teenage girls was the way they bad-mouthed other women.

Unlike her daughter, Mrs. Adachi was sociable and chatty. Other than her wrinkles, she was nearly identical to her offspring, especially the curve of her jaw and the color of her hair. In fact, if I hadn’t seen her up close, I might have mistaken her for Adachi with a different

hairstyle.

Come to think of it, their house was pretty far from here. *At least she's motivated to work out, I guess*, I scoffed to myself, without thinking too hard about what exactly I was implying she *didn't* have motivation for. *Man, it's hot in here.*

It felt like an August afternoon, and I was starting to get dizzy. I was never a fan of warm temperatures to begin with, but Mrs. Adachi had held the door open for me on her way in, so it would have been rude not to follow her.

"Good grief... That reminds me, how old's your daughter now?"

"Fifteen. Just started high school," Mrs. Adachi answered. *Interesting.* Most people in our grade had already turned sixteen; apparently Adachi's birthday hadn't rolled around yet.

"Oh, that's great! Must be a relief not to have to study for entrance exams anymore."

"Mm-hmm."

"Mine's gearing up to apply to college this year."

Idly, I wondered if my mom ever had this conversation.

"While I'd like to say things are easier with exams out of the way...with my daughter, things are *never* easy. She's so difficult!" Mrs. Adachi explained with a dry laugh.

This caught my attention—specifically the word *difficult*.

"She never communicates with me, so I can never tell what she's thinking. And she's so *gloomy*—always keeps to herself! I just don't understand her."

Her tone was so light and airy, she barely seemed to skim the surface of the topic. In fact, she didn't sound like a mother at all—not if she treated her own child like some indecipherable alien creature. Adults were always so quick to forget that they were teenagers too, once upon a time. So I spoke up.

"Excuse me."

Every now and then I found myself cutting into conversations purely on impulse.

"I admit I don't know all the details about Ada—er, your daughter—but I don't think you should talk about her like that."

I don't know why I lied. Then again, maybe in a certain sense I hadn't. After all, I couldn't exactly claim to know *everything* about Adachi.

My heart thumped in my chest as a wave of panic settled over my eyeballs. It took a lot of courage to speak out against an adult—courage that I didn't have—and I was scared out of my wits. Now I was *really* sweating, and not from the heat.

Mrs. Adachi looked at me dubiously. Clearly she hadn't anticipated me butting into her conversation.

"How are you going to understand her if you don't ever try?"

She glared back at me. *What? Am I really that off-base?*

My mom was a total nag, but at least she understood her daughters. And she only understood us because she actively tried to connect with us. Wasn't it a bit unfair to dump the blame entirely in Adachi's lap? *It takes two to tango, you know!*

"Oh, but just to be clear, I'm not trying to start an argument," I added hastily, before she could start shouting at me in her shrill mom voice. I wasn't stupid enough to think I could win a debate against someone twice my age. And even if I could, it wouldn't accomplish anything. I couldn't be sure she would even listen to my advice.

"Are you here with your parents?" Mrs. Adachi asked, her voice a lot calmer than I was expecting.

"My mom, yeah," I replied.

"What's her name?"

"I don't see what that has to do with this." I was speaking for myself, not my mother. Before she could get another word in, I continued, "I'm not trying to pick a fight with you."

I wanted to make that clear to her—I wasn't looking to meddle in her life, just like I wasn't looking for anyone to meddle in mine. Granted, it wasn't exactly mature of me to criticize her without giving her a chance to defend herself, but teenagers weren't exactly known for being mature, now were we?

To be honest, Mrs. Adachi could have just written me off as an ignorant child who didn't know what she was talking about, but she didn't. Instead, she froze in her tracks. Judging from the look in her eye, she wasn't angry—rather, she seemed almost *intrigued* at the suggestion.

Since I hadn't introduced myself, she had no way of knowing Adachi and I were actually friends, but...since I was the same age as her daughter, maybe that was what piqued her interest.

Perplexed, the other woman stayed silent, watching us. But Mrs. Adachi didn't say anything else. Instead, she continued to gaze at me curiously. Now the ball was in my court, and it was my move. Finally I began to see a familial resemblance.

"But since we have no way of knowing who's right...I'll challenge you to a contest."

"A contest?"

I was being ridiculously aggressive, even by my own standards. Still, I had a feeling this way would be more efficient. Talk is cheap, as they say, and I wanted to settle this once and for all.

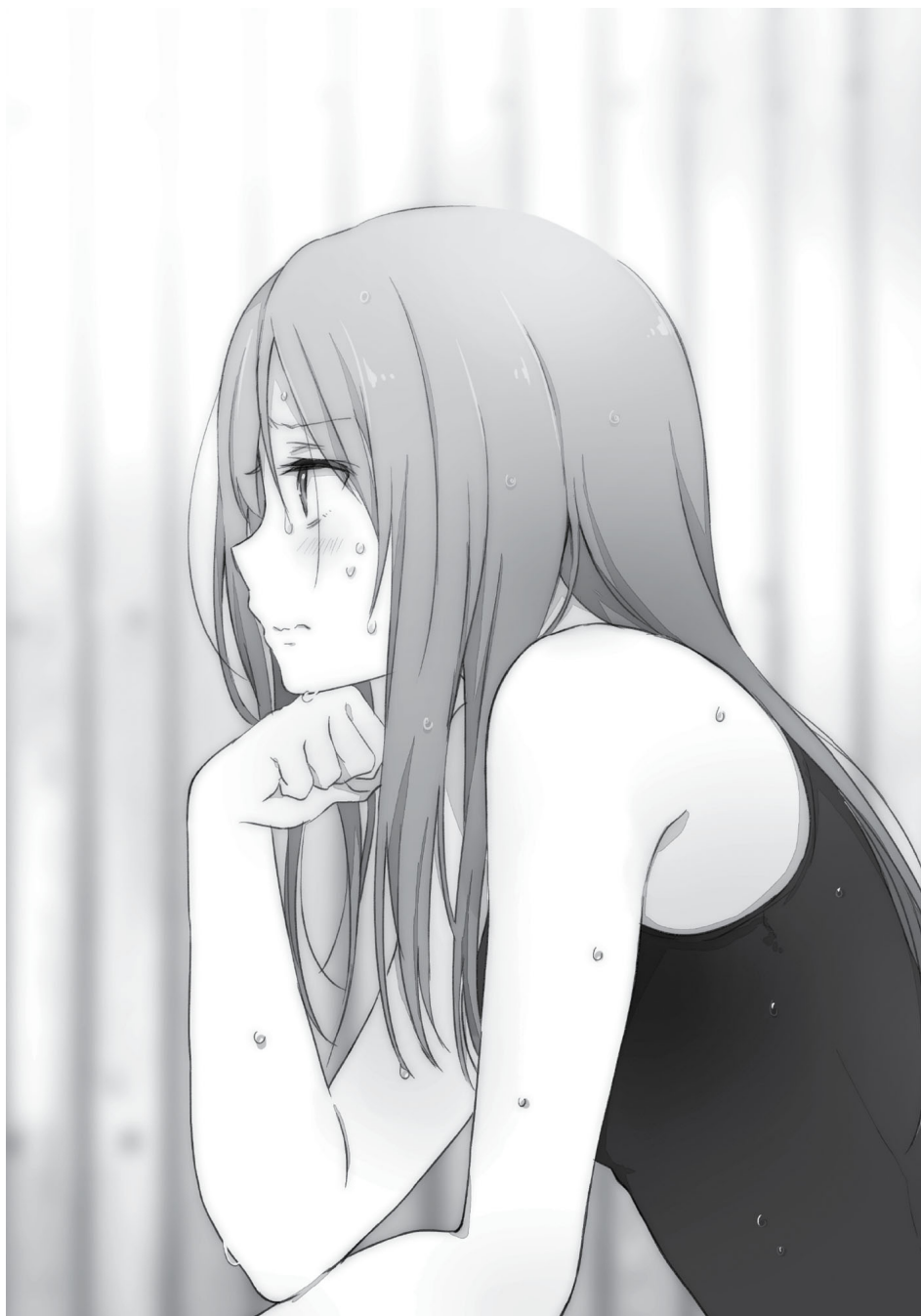
"Whoever can stay in here the longest wins. And if I win, you have to go home and act like a real mom to your daughter, just for one day."

What was the point of making her do this? What did I even mean by "real mom"? I didn't have a clue. But if I won, maybe I'd have something interesting to look forward to the next time I talked to Adachi. That was the closest thing I had to a motive.

"Is this how kids these days get their kicks?"

"Something like that."

I wasn't doing this for Adachi—I was doing it for *me*. I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees.



I could feel something dripping down my back. Whether it was pool water or sweat, I couldn't tell. Maybe this was a bad idea...but before I could change my mind, Mrs. Adachi mimicked my posture, leaning forward with her head in her hands. Apparently the battle was on. *No going back now.*

I was a little amazed, actually, that she'd accept a challenge from some rando she'd barely spoken to. It reminded me of when Adachi challenged Yashiro to a competition at the bowling alley. Maybe it ran in the family.

Meanwhile, the other woman tilted her head in confusion. "You two are so odd," she mused.

Yeah, this was definitely a little abnormal. I wasn't trying to *fix* Mrs. Adachi; I just felt like someone ought to stand up for her daughter. So how did we end up here?

Nevertheless, our battle of endurance continued...which is to say, we sat there in silence. Nothing much to write home about, except it felt like my soul was evaporating along with my sweat. Maybe I should have challenged her to a swimming competition instead. At least that would have been kind of fun, even if I probably would've lost.

Then Mrs. Adachi's friend left. On her way out, she warned us not to "overdo it," but my ears were starting to ring, so I couldn't make out anything else she said. Idly, I wondered what Adachi would think if she knew her mom was sitting here, competing in this juvenile contest—and with *me* of all people.

"What does it mean to be a 'real' mother, anyway?" Mrs. Adachi asked after a while, her voice dry.

I gave it some thought, but try as I might, I couldn't find the right words—just fuzzy imagery. *Ugh.*

"I don't have any kids myself, so I can't be sure," I answered finally.

"Okay then, how about your *idea* of a real mother?"

What, so my vision of the perfect mom? How am I supposed to describe that? "I don't know... Normal?"

"And how does a 'normal' mother act?"

"She...spends time with her kids? Eats dinner with them, I guess?"

How should I know?"

The moment I tried to put it into words, my mental image of the perfect mother blurred even more. Be it friend or family member, no human relationship could truly exist within rigid structures. You could try to flesh it out, but no matter what you did, it would always end up hollow on the inside. If you tried to give voice to the unspoken parts, they would lose their value as "unspoken" and shift into something else. And once you nailed down the parts you thought you knew, you'd mistakenly assume that was all there was to it, then feel disappointed that it wasn't what you originally wanted.

Just as it would be a mistake to turn a blind eye to someone's faults, it wasn't right to focus on them exclusively, either. A healthy relationship required the full picture.

I knew Mrs. Adachi probably wasn't satisfied with my half-assed answer, but she fell silent nonetheless. With each bead of sweat that trickled down her eyelids, she grimaced and started jiggling her leg more aggressively. I stared down at the floor and braced myself. Another ten or so minutes passed, meaning we'd been in there for nearly twenty minutes now.

"Did you hear about the old guy who stayed in here longer than he was supposed to? I heard he got a nosebleed and passed out."

She was clearly trying to get under my skin. *Very mature of you.*

"Want me to let you win?" she offered with a stiff smile, her face as red as a tomato.

As for me, I was too stubborn to let her hand me the victory on a silver platter. "No thank you."

"Then you should let me."

"No." *What is this conversation we're having right now? Is the heat getting to our brains?*

"Okay then, I'll let you win."

"Please don't." It was getting harder and harder to keep up with her mind games.

"I just...wish she would be straightforward with me about how she feels," Mrs. Adachi volunteered out of nowhere, pouting her bottom lip. "No matter where I took her, she would always clam right up... I could never tell if she was having fun or if she was miserable."

“...Your daughter, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“How long ago was this?”

“Oh, she would’ve been...” She paused to count on her fingers. “Five...? Actually, maybe four?”

Four years old... In my mind, I pictured a miniature version of Adachi.

“Instead of getting hung up on what she was like *back then*, maybe you should pay attention to what she’s like *today*.”

“But if I try to pry into her life, she’ll hate my guts. I know *I* was like that at her age.”

“Yeah...”

Sure, nobody liked a nosy parent, but even *that* was better than being straight-up neglected. Sometimes your mom was the only person you could turn to about certain things... I just wished this woman could see that. Maybe it was hypocritical of us to push them away only to complain when they were gone, but it was *their* job to know how to handle that.

“All right, I think it’s time for me to let you win.”

“You really don’t have to...”

She rose to her feet and staggered toward the door. *She’s actually leaving!* Apparently she couldn’t stand it anymore. Right before she opened the door, however, she came to a stop and slowly, sluggishly, turned back to look at me.

“My daughter... Actually, you know what, never mind.”

Shaking her head, she decided not to finish that thought. Instead, she walked out.

I got up and followed suit. Had I said something to offend her? I tried to remember, but it made my head hurt. Stumbling out of the steam room, I collapsed into a white chair nearby, completely exhausted.

Then, belatedly, I realized I hadn’t set the condition for what would happen if *she* won. Surely she must have noticed that, and yet she didn’t point it out to me...but why? My brain was total mush, and I couldn’t exactly put my finger on it, but I had a vague idea as to her

reasoning: She must have decided to be the “bigger person” in order to maintain her dignity as a grown adult. That had to be it.

Meanwhile, as a teenager, I pretended to have all the answers.

I could hear my body speaking to me: *You put in a lot of effort yesterday, so go ahead and take it easy today!* At least, that’s how I decided to interpret this muscle tenderness. Thus, Monday morning found me not in the classroom, but on the second floor of the gym, lying on the floor of the loft. The hardwood was chilly at first—a sign that winter was well and truly on its way.

By sheer coincidence or perhaps a miracle, Adachi was there, too. Not only was she hanging out with me, but she had graciously agreed to be my pillow. I laid with my head against her thigh. Her skin was chilly at first, but as with the floor, it warmed up after a while. Unlike the floor, however, it was nice and soft.

“I’m getting some *déjà vu*. Didn’t we do this before?”

“Yeah, once. But our roles were switched.”

“Oh, that’s right.”

I rolled over onto my other side to find Adachi staring not at me, but the ceiling. Her mouth was agape, and she seemed distracted. Plus, her cheeks were flushed, and her leg muscles were...spasming?

“Hey, uh, your leg’s twitching. You okay?”

“Uh...wha...? Oh, uh, I’m fine. It’s no biggie.”

She didn’t seem “fine” to me...so I gave the twitchy spot a big poke with my finger, and her entire leg jerked up reflexively. With my head on an incline, I slid down her thigh to her hip, onto her skirt. Then she lowered her leg, but moving back was too much effort, so I stayed put.

I thought back to the last time we did this. Back then, she mentioned smelling my scent, and now the tables were turned.

Meanwhile, she continued to stare up at the ceiling. Her mind was elsewhere, but her body was still as responsive as ever. *Hmm.*

I thought back to the conversation I had with Mrs. Adachi yesterday. Did she have anything to do with how her daughter was acting this morning? Is that why Adachi felt the need to come up here? If so, that would make it partially my fault as well.

After a long moment, Adachi found her words.

“What did you do yesterday?”

“Me? Oh, you know. Just kinda floated around.”

“*Floated?*” She quirked a brow at my word choice.

For some reason I felt compelled to conceal the fact that I’d gone to the gym. Granted, it was possible she had no idea her mom even went there, but even so, there was no sense in me blabbing about it. I looked up to find her glancing around nervously.

“Yesterday, uh...”

“Yeah?”

“My mom was...acting kinda weird,” she mumbled.

I knew it. Great, now I’ve made Adachi miss another day of class.

“Weird how?” I asked, playing dumb even though I could probably wager a guess as to the answer.

She ran a hand through her hair as she fumbled for the right words. “She...ate dinner with me.”

“And...that’s weird?”

At my house, that was pretty par for the course. My mom, dad, sister and I had always eaten our meals together ever since I could remember, so it was hard for me to put myself in her shoes.

“Yeah. It was just sorta...rare? And...suffocating,” she explained, fumbling for adjectives one at a time. I couldn’t sense any happiness concealed in her voice, just pure confusion. “I’m used to her cooking for me, but she would never eat it with me usually.”

“Interesting.”

“She’s barely ever home anyway.”

Apparently she’d kept her end of the bargain. *Maybe she has more integrity than I gave her credit for*, I thought. This was another trait she and her daughter had in common.

“Was it fun, at least?”

“Not really. We didn’t talk, so it was super uncomfortable. Couldn’t even taste the food.”

“Oh...that sucks...”

“And then this morning I ate breakfast alone again, so it’s like... was it some kind of fluke?”

“Hmm...yeah, I couldn’t tell you,” I lied, hugging my knees to my chest.

Her mother had probably felt just as uncomfortable as she had. But I knew this particular brand of mother-daughter relationship wasn’t all that uncommon, so I didn’t feel bad for either side in particular. If anything, I simply regretted the part I played in the whole debacle.

None of it had inspired any lasting change in Adachi, but perhaps it was more important (for her, anyway) that she was able to talk to me—or anyone, really—about the way it made her feel.

You know, it’s funny—the two of us are almost total opposites. Our home lives... The way we interact with people... The times we need intimacy, and the times we need space... On second thought, maybe we’re a perfect match. The more you have, the more you take for granted, and vice versa. Maybe that’s just how it works.

To be clear, I didn’t particularly *want* to live my life alone—not that it was possible in the first place. A wise philosopher once said that “any person who can fully separate themselves from society is no longer a person at all,” or something like that...because the social aspect is an integral part of humanity, I guess? I could understand that for the most part.

Me, I was perfectly content staying human. Hence, there I was, lying with my head in Adachi’s lap.

Just then, she let out a “whoa,” and when I looked up, I found her staring down at me. Apparently it had taken her this long to realize that I had rolled closer to her stomach. She froze, startled. I moved to lift my head, but then she hastily pressed it back down.

What the hell?

Regardless, I didn’t fight it. Instead, I let her press me against her leg. The fabric of her skirt was scratchy against my face.

Great, now my nose will get even flatter. Oh well. For a while I just lay there, my face buried in her thighs. *Wait, no, that makes me sound*

like a pervert. I attempted to think of a more wholesome way to put it, but it was getting harder and harder to breathe, so I gave up. *Fine, pervert it is.*

At last she pulled her hand away and I was free to roll onto my side, where I sucked in a breath like a swimmer coming up for air. It tasted different over here, and the thought made me smile. “You were right.”

“Huh?”

“I can really smell your scent down here.”

Instantly her face flushed, almost like I’d flipped a switch in her cheeks. It was mildly reminiscent of Mrs. Adachi in the steam room, except the color was different—her mother’s face was beet red, but hers was pink. Much cuter. At last, I’d found something that set the two of them apart.

“Hey Adachi, could I watch you do a sit-up?” I asked.

“What for...? What is with you and sit-ups lately?”

“I don’t know. I just want to see,” I answered vaguely.

She paused for a minute, then started moving. Maybe she was hoping she could hide her blushing this way. *Too late for that, I’m afraid.*

She crawled on her hands and knees to an open space. Then she sat down with her legs pointed in my direction, lay down on her back, and did a series of sit-ups with no trouble at all. Her movements were slow, but she kept it up without pause. After her fifth one, she lay back on the floor and fell still.

Somehow, it felt like she was showing off as the “cooler” delinquent.

“Grrrr...” I stared at her. She seemed to sense my gaze.

“What?” she asked, looking up at me. She had such an innocent look on her face... It made me want to tease her.

“You know I can see up your skirt, right?”

I didn’t actually look, for the record. I was just messing with her. But she bolted upright in terror like my sister whenever she saw a cockroach. Pressing her skirt down, she adjusted her sitting position, then glared at me. Paired with her pink cheeks, she was the perfect picture of a bullied child...

Wait, does that make me a bully?

“Hold on—are you actually mad at me? I was just warning you!”

“This is sexual harassment!”

Never in my life had I been accused of sexually harassing someone, probably because I was a girl.

“Oh, come on! No one’s looking except me!”

Technically not even *I* was looking, but whatever. Meanwhile, Adachi scratched her flushed cheek. “That kinda makes it worse...”

“Worse?”

“Yeah.”

I would’ve liked more of an explanation, but apparently she didn’t feel the need to clarify. I gave her a minute to calm down, then attempted to steer the conversation back on track.



“Anyway, it’s really cool that you can do sit-ups! Maybe it’s all that bike riding you do.”

“You *sure* you can’t do it?”

“Hah...”

I could feel my muscles screaming at me as I moved my body, shifting onto my back. I could smell the dust that coated the floor of the loft, and I wasn’t excited about getting it in my hair, but then the high ceiling came into view, and I gradually stopped caring.

I cupped a hand under my head, bent my knees, and inhaled. Then, exhaling, I lifted my neck. My shoulders rose a few centimeters off the floor, followed by my back. I could feel my neck cramping already. But my stomach had no muscle to support my weight, and thus any further progress was rendered impossible. Eventually I ran out of breath in my lungs and gave up.

“Was that...supposed to be a sit-up?” Adachi asked, and I could hear the silent implication that I had barely moved at all. *Yeah, I know—there was no “sitting up” involved. I get that,* I thought to myself, arguing with the Adachi in my head.

Grinning bashfully—or trying to, at least, assuming my facial muscles were willing to cooperate—I used my hands to push myself up into a sitting position. I’d given it my best shot, but...you know, my post-workout soreness had gotten in the way, that’s all.

“I guess I can’t expect anything to change after just one day.”

Adachi cocked her head and stared at me. Evidently she didn’t understand what I was talking about...but things would get more complicated if she *did*, so I could live with that.

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, just a random observation.”

I pushed myself to my feet, dusted my butt off, and headed for the stairs. It was nearly lunch, and I was planning to camp out here for a while yet, so I figured I might as well go buy something to eat. For both of us.

That way at least some things could remain unspoken.

Interlude: Yashiro Comes Calling Part 1

I MOVE TO THE RIGHT—*whoosh*—she moves to the right. I move to the left—*whoosh*—she moves to the left. Then I decide to make a full-on run for it—*zoom!* She chases after me. Argh!

Fortunately, I'm close to home, so I run inside. I check to make sure my big sister's shoes are by the front door, then dash down the hallway. "*Nee-chan! Nee-chaaaan!*" I wail as I run into our bedroom.

Inside, I find my sister watching TV. She leans back in her floor chair and looks at me upside-down, her long hair hanging down limply, like the creepy girl in that movie I'm not allowed to watch. She rolls her upside-down eyes at me. "Yeah, yeah, welcome home."

"No, you don't understand! There's a weirdo!"

"What? A weirdo?"

Yeah! Even weirder than you! "She's got this hair that's like *bwaahhh!* And she chased me!"

I move my hands to demonstrate. She gets to her feet.

"Was it a stranger? Are you okay? Did this person do anything to you?"

She crouches down in front of me and looks at me all worried. Whoa...she hardly ever does that. Now she almost looks like a grown-up.

"She, um, she tried to block me when I was walking."

"Anything else? Did she touch you, or ask you to go with her somewhere?"

"Umm...no..."

"Okay, good."

She heaves a sigh of relief and loosens her stiff shoulders. Then she stands up straight and leaves the room. I guess she's gonna go check for the weirdo. I follow after her.

“You can stay right where you are,” she says, and for a minute I think about staying, but then I remember she’ll need me to point out who the weirdo is, so I follow anyway. She’s supposed to put her shoes on at the entryway, but she doesn’t.

“Nee-chan’s breaking the rules!”

“Shhhh!” She crouches down and peers outside through the mail slot. Then she lets out a big sigh. “Yeah, you’re right. There’s a weirdo out there.”

She straightens up again, then...opens the door?! Why?!

“Hey, you! Little mystery girl! Maybe don’t be a creep in front of someone else’s house!” she calls, and the weirdo turns to look.

She’s the same size as me, all bundled up in lots of layers, her hat sagging down. What’s so weird about her, you ask? She’s got blue hair! It’s tied up like a butterfly, and it’s got these sparklies that hover around it! Oh, and she’s got a container full of croquettes. Why? Don’t know.

“Oh! Destiny!”

Wait, what? Is she friends with my sister? She runs over gleefully, her beach sandals clacking against the sidewalk. *Aren’t your feet cold?* When she comes to a stop, her sparklies fly forward with the momentum. So pretty.

“Oh *ho*! So this is where you live.”

“Don’t try to play dumb with me.” Nee-chan reaches out and pinches the weirdo’s cheek until it stretches like mochi.

“Mggghh?”

“My little sister says some weirdo was chasing her around. Was it you?”

She puts a hand behind my back and pushes me forward.

“Mmhhnn,” the weirdo replies with her cheek stretched out. My sister pulls her hand away. The other girl shakes off the pain, then nods.

“I sensed her signal was the same as yours. So she’s your sister... I see now.”

What signal? I don’t get it.

Nee-chan puts a hand on the girl’s head and turns to me.

“This little weirdo is Yashiro. Weird as she may be, I’m pretty sure

she's not scary. She's my friend... No, she's my..."

"Destiny."

What? And her name is Yashiro? That sounds hard to say, so I'm gonna call her Yachi. Wait, I get it! She's a bad kid like Nee-chan! She's got dyed hair and everything!

"So, did you need something from me?"

"No, not at all. Although I do have these croquettes." She beams and holds up her container.

Ever since Nee-chan started high school, she's brought home nothing but weirdos. I'm starting to get real worried about her. Oh, but the other girl didn't have dyed hair, so maybe that one's okay.

I try to hide behind my sister, but Yachi walks around her. Argh! I move around to the opposite side—*whoosh*. She follows me. Why does she keep chasing me? She's like one of those dogs that likes to bully scared little kids.

The two of us run in circles around my sister. For a while she whips her head around to watch us, but then she gets bored of it or something and puts a hand on each of our heads to stop us. Then she turns and starts walking.

"You kids have fun. I'm gonna go study."

"Noooo!" *Don't leave me here with her!* I run after her and grab her.

"Hey! Let go of my skirt!" She puts a hand to my forehead and pushes me off.

Meanwhile, Yachi puts a hand on her hip and gets all smug for some reason. "I am not a 'kid,' Shimamura-san."

Nee-chan turns to look at Yachi. "How old are you, then?"

"Let's see here..." She starts counting, finger by finger. Once she gets to ten, she closes her fists and starts over. She does this again...and again...and again...and again.

At first my sister watches her in silence, but after a while she gets annoyed. "Hurry up already."

Then, finally, Yachi turns to her and says, "I'm about 670 years old."

"So you've been alive since what, the Middle Ages? That's cool,"

Nee-chan jokes, her shoulders shaking with her giggles.

Yachi, on the other hand, is totally serious about it. “I’m speaking in Earth years, of course. For the record, I believe my compatriot is about 800 years old.”

My sister rolls her eyes and rubs her forehead in exasperation.

“What do you mean, Earth years?” I ask, ’cuz nothing she said makes any sense to me. She walks right up to me, and before I can back away, she leans close to my ear and whispers.

“Don’t tell anyone, but I’m an alien.”

“...What?”

“Don’t listen to her,” my sister warns me. *Awww, how come? She’s got weird blue hair, doesn’t she? How can you act like it’s no big deal?!*

Then Yachi pulls the red rubber band off of her container and opens the lid to reveal three croquettes inside. She takes one and offers it to me. Looking at her, it kinda feels like somebody on the internet pasted a croquette picture on top of another picture.

“This is a symbol of our new friendship. Want it?”

“Uh...okay.” I take the croquette, tear off a piece, and hand it to my sister. She pops it in her mouth.

“Tastes familiar,” she comments after a second. I try a bite, too. Yeah, this tastes like a croquette from the butcher’s shop! Our mom brings them home whenever she “can’t be bothered” to cook, whatever that means. The butcher shop croquettes are made with lots of potato and a little bit of meat. I like them a lot.

“*Destiny*,” Yachi says again, but this time I guess she’s talking about the croquettes? I don’t really get it, but she seems to think they’re tasty, at least. My sister laughs and shakes her head.

Then Yachi grins at me, and now that I know her name, suddenly she doesn’t seem all that weird anymore. Instead, she’s just...pretty. Her eyes and hair settle into my heart like magic. She’s the same size as me, but I’ve never seen anyone like her at my elementary school.

In my mind, she’s a fairy—with wings and everything—filling my mind with blue, blue, blue.

And that was the day I met Yachi, my weirdo friend.

Chapter 2: Adachi's Question

WOULD IT BE WEIRD to walk around town with Shimamura on Christmas Day?

This was the question that plagued my mind over the past few days while I was supposed to be studying for finals. The warm air from the heater didn't reach my feet. I jiggled them impatiently as I sat with my elbow on the desk, staring down at my textbook as I pretended to study.

Eventually, I decided to drop the act and just flop down on my bed. My ceiling light was brighter than I expected, since we just changed the bulb recently. Rubbing my cheek, I rolled on my side and looked over at the window. The air was getting dry in here, and I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep.

It was the first Friday of December. This upcoming Monday marked the start of finals week. With the added misery of winter's chill, this was the most stressful time of year for us high-schoolers. Obviously I couldn't cut class during the exams. Besides, the gym loft was getting so cold, I couldn't even touch my bare feet to the floor without flinching back. Somehow I had lost the motivation to go up there anymore.

From spring to fall, that loft was our little hideaway...but where would we migrate for the winter?

That question was what led me to my current conundrum: Christmas.

The year was full of holidays, but hardly any of them were safe to celebrate with another girl. I mean, I *could* celebrate them with another girl, but for the most part it would be kinda weird. Not like the two of us had any special anniversary or anything to commemorate, so Christmas was the closest thing I had to a viable pretext.

I could try to hang out with her on New Year's, but that was more of a "family" sort of holiday. After that would be Valentine's Day, but I couldn't imagine us casually giving gifts of chocolate to each other. Did I even have the courage to try? Somehow I could already see myself freaking her out with my nervous energy. Knowing her, she wouldn't

have a return gift prepared, and no matter how firmly I insisted I didn't need one, she'd feel obligated to go and buy me something anyway. Yeah, I didn't want to put her through all that effort.

Since Valentine's Day was starting to sound complicated, I decided to put it on the back burner for now. Instead, I attempted to picture us meeting up on Christmas Day and walking around town...only to find that I kind of couldn't picture it at all. I had no experience walking around *anywhere* on Christmas, since school was closed for winter break, plus it was always freezing cold outside. Hence, I had no idea if it was even remotely common for girls to hang out around town together on Christmas Day. Instead, all I could do was fill in the blanks with my own imagination.

On bad days I would decide the idea was "too weird" and get bummed out about it, but on good days it would start to feel like no big deal. My outlook kept flip-flopping, and it was driving me insane. I would argue with myself back and forth and back and forth until I was completely exhausted—sometimes even to the point of a migraine—and tonight was no exception. *Seriously, how many days have I spent tearing myself apart over this?*

Suddenly I couldn't bear to lie still for a moment longer. I jumped out of bed and returned to my desk. There, I opened my textbook to a random page and started flipping through it, although I wasn't really reading any of it. This book didn't have the answer to my question. And even if it did, I wasn't inclined to accept it.

"Am I overthinking this?" I asked myself aloud.

It felt like I'd backed myself into a corner and up a tree, and now I couldn't find my way back down again. Maybe I was making it harder than it needed to be. Maybe putting it into words was all I would need to find the answer.

I mean, all I want to do is hang out with her, right?

The problem, however, was that I wanted to hang out specifically on Christmas Day. Would Shimamura think that was weird? Or would she shrug her shoulders and say "sure"? I kept waffling back and forth between the two possibilities.

As a test, I scribbled "Shimamura" in the corner of my notebook. Sure enough, seeing it written out made me think of the Shimamura Co. logo.

Come to think of it, what was Shimamura's first name, anyway? I could remember her joking that she tended to forget it half the time, and now I'd forgotten it, too. Did anyone ever address her by it? If not, maybe I could be the first. After all, that was precisely the sort of "special privilege" I wanted our friendship to have. But then again...I couldn't really imagine myself calling her anything other than Shimamura. If I did, I wouldn't really be the same person anymore, in my opinion.

Yeah... She'll always be Shimamura, I thought to myself as I stared down at her name in my handwriting. Then the shame set in as I realized—*God, I'm completely obsessed with her. Cringe*. I hastily erased what I'd written, but even then, a faint outline remained.

It was the perfect metaphor for the way I woke up every morning still thinking of her.

How far would I go for Shimamura, if she asked me?

Not in the "would I carry her bookbag" sense—more of a "would I give her a piggyback ride" sort of thing. *For the record, I think I would*. If she asked me to go shopping with her, I'd happily go, and if she asked me to take a nap with her... *No, no, no! She wouldn't ask me these things! It's supposed to be a what-if scenario, not a fantasy!*

There I was, yet again, thinking about Shimamura during class. At this rate, I probably thought about her more than *she* did. That didn't mean I understood her, however. I could walk along the lakeshore all I wanted, but I'd never discover its chill, nor its depths.

Every now and then I would get so hung up on the idea of social interaction that I couldn't actually bring myself to go through with it. Instead, I'd just watch as my friendships slowly petered out.

My parents were convinced something was wrong with me. This was something I'd known for a while now. Personally, I would say I expressed my emotions a fair bit, but apparently they weren't able to pick up on them for whatever reason. I wasn't sure what exactly I was doing wrong—I was just imitating what everybody else did, or so I thought. Was it just a matter of interpersonal compatibility?

They say blood is thicker than water, but in my experience, blood was nothing more than a bodily fluid. There were no “ties” to be had, no bonds, nothing keeping it from running down the drain...and so, down the drain it went.

But when it came to Shimamura, I could tell my intentions were plainly obvious. To an embarrassing degree, actually. Fortunately Shimamura didn’t seem to notice most of the time, probably because she sincerely didn’t care. For me, this was both a blessing and a curse.

Objectively speaking, our friendship was imbalanced. I clearly cared more about her than she did about me.

For example, I liked to have phone calls with her, but she preferred to stick to email. You could chalk this up to a difference in our personalities or attitudes or whatever, but for me, waiting for a response to my emails always stressed me out. It was easier to just call her, get my answer, and be done with it.

Of course, I couldn’t exactly call her during class. We were both right there in the same room, but we were too far apart to have an in-person conversation. All I could do was shoot her furtive glances, though our eyes almost never met. She was a surprisingly diligent student when she put her mind to it. *Not me, though, I guess.* I cupped my chin in my hand and stared down at my desk.

As I agonized ad infinitum, the bell rang. Fortunately, I had long since given up on finishing my test.

After school, I finally made my move. I hadn’t spoken with Shimamura for nearly two full days, and my ears were crying... *Wait, what?* I pictured salty fluid leaking from my ear holes. *Gross. Never mind.*

I closed my textbook, stuffed it into my bookbag, and rose from my desk. It was going to take a hefty chunk of courage to go talk to Shimamura. I wasn’t planning to say anything untoward, and yet for some reason I felt disinclined to approach her in public. Was I just paranoid?

My brain only generated a small amount of courage per day—just

enough for me to survive at school—so I couldn't really save any up. Maybe it was odd that I needed any at all, but hey, at least I wasn't using it for anything weird, right? Right.

Just as I approached her desk, however, Hino and Nagafuji walked up. Reflexively I backed away...and there went my chance to speak to Shimamura.

"It's scarf season again!" Hino announced.

"Where did *that* come from?" Shimamura retorted. Hino wasn't even wearing a scarf. *What a weirdo.*

"So tell me, Shimako-chan, have you been studying for finals?"

"Maybe. What about you guys?"

"As if you even need to ask!" Hino folded her arms smugly. *Is that a yes or a no?*

"I don't even know what a test is!" Nagafuji declared.

"When you say it, it doesn't sound like a joke anymore," Shimamura sighed.

"Hmmm," she replied pensively, lifting her glasses to rub at her eyes. *Oh god, she's not denying it!*

"So, did you need something?"

"Not really! Can't I just say hi to my pal?" Hino asked, still posing haughtily for some reason.

Shimamura set her bookbag on her desk. "No, I don't think so."

"I agree," nodded Nagafuji, who clearly wasn't paying attention to the actual conversation. Shimamura looked at her and laughed...but there was a restlessness in her gaze that suggested she wasn't exactly enthused. Probably because Shimamura didn't really do small talk.

"In that case, I'll make something up! Let's see...I need to...say goodbye to everyone! You know, like in elementary school?"

"Oh yeah. We'd all be like 'Goodbye, everybody! Goodbye, Sensei!'"

Shimamura's gaze grew wistful, like she was thinking back to a time long forgotten. Then she slowly raised her hand and waved goodbye.

In response, Hino waved back. Then she turned, took a step

toward me, and stared me right in the eye.

“Hey there, Ada-cheechee! Have you been studying?”

Another day, another new nickname. *I assume she just makes them up on the spot.* “Sure, a decent amount.”

“Whoa, really? Look at you, Miss Goody-Two-Shoes!” Shimamura exclaimed, looking at me in mild surprise as she tucked her textbook into her bag. Apparently she’d given up on me ever turning over a new leaf. *She knows me too well.*

“Good for you! I should take a page out of your book,” Nagafuji mused.

“What? Why aren’t you studying?!” Hino demanded, smacking her lightly over the head. Nagafuji even crouched down so she could reach. *Why would you do that?*

Then I realized neither of them had invited Shimamura to hang out. Evidently they were both going straight home today. This came as a bit of a relief.

“Alrighty! Today I think I’ll hang out at your place, Nagafuji!”

“You do that *every* day. I always see you lounging by the kotatsu.”

“What? Nahhh! Don’t be silly! See? You’re just being silly.”

“You’re right... I guess I was wrong.”

“No, no, you were right! See? Doesn’t it feel like you were right?”

“Wow, you’re right! So that means...I *do* see you every day!”

And so Hino and Nagafuji filed out of the classroom, taking their idiotic conversation with them. I didn’t know them very well, but I already had a pretty good idea of who they were as people. Hino was a “what you see is what you get” sort of girl, but when it came to Nagafuji, you were better off not judging that book by its cover.

Man, they’re such good friends. I never saw one without the other. Kind of like me and Shimamura, except they hung out wayyyy more often. That, and Shimamura would sometimes spend time with other friends. Every now and then I’d see her with them and my throat would get all tight.

Once they were gone, Shimamura’s probing gaze settled on me.

“Did you need—no, scratch that! I shouldn’t talk to people like

that. I'm sorry."

She rubbed her forehead. Apparently her conversation with Hino had convinced her to mend her ways. She grabbed her bookbag and rose to her feet.

"So, what's up? Oh, I guess that's not much better. Ugh, what am I supposed to say?" Frowning, she adjusted her scarf. Apparently she was taking this *very* seriously. "Help me out here!"

"It doesn't matter," I replied. Who *wouldn't* react with "What's up?" when they saw a friend approach? It didn't bother me. If anything, I actually appreciated having someone else initiate the conversation.

"Okay, we'll come back to that subject later. All right, so, what do you need?"

Apparently she'd decided to put it off. *Good*. Maybe now I could get the ball rolling. Ugh, why did I always get cold feet inviting her somewhere? Probably because I was scared of rejection, I guess. Scared of making people feel uncomfortable.

"I was wondering if you'd maybe want to...study together?"

"Oh, a study session?" Surprised, she tapped her bookbag.

Admittedly, yes, I was a total delinquent who never went to class, but during finals week, this was the best excuse I was going to get if I wanted to spend time with her. I knew she wasn't going to want to goof off downtown.

"Well now! You're a regular honors student!"

"Oh, please. Everybody studies before finals. It's common sense."

"Maybe I'm rubbing off on you," she joked, smiling playfully.

But to be honest, she was completely right. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have come to class at all. I was tempted to thank her outright, but I had a feeling she'd just look at me weird, so I kept it to myself.

"I wish you'd said something sooner. We could've invited the others."

"Huh?"

"They may act like a couple of clowns, but their grades are better than ours."

Her gaze shifted to the door. If I didn't act quickly, I knew she

might just dash out into the hall to call them back. Personally, I wanted it to be just the two of us—but I stopped myself before I could admit it out loud. No, I needed a different reason.

“They’re...too smart for us! I mean, we could *try* to study with them, but, uh...they wouldn’t get anything out of it, so...”

“Oh, I get it! You think I’m stupid!”

“What?”

Out of nowhere, Shimamura pointed an accusatory finger in my face, grinning at me like a bratty child. “Just because we have the same grades, you think I’m a total moron, don’t you?”

“What? No! Not at all!”

Wait... Is she implying I’m stupid, too...? But before I could ask...

“Honestly, you’re not wrong. Okay then, just the two of us it is.”

Instantly, I no longer cared how stupid she thought I was. I felt something creep up the back of my neck—faint hope, perhaps.

“Where would we do it? I think there’s a library somewhere in the neighborhood... Oh, wait, there’s a library right here at school. Duh.”

No, no, no! I wanted it to happen somewhere more private. Somewhere we could relax. “Can’t we just do it at...your house or whatever?”

“What? But it’ll be dusty!”

She seemed reluctant. *Wait, what? Dusty?* I didn’t remember her room being very dusty at all. Then I remembered *everything else* about my last visit and screamed internally. Fortunately Shimamura appeared to have forgotten about it, but to me, my behavior that day was humiliating and *objectively* creepy. It was a miracle I didn’t crash my bike on the way home from that.

“What about *your* house?” Shimamura asked.

“Mine?”

Before I could reject the suggestion by insisting my house was too far from hers, I remembered the empty Pocari can sitting in my room. If she were to recognize it as the one I took home from our trip to the park that one day, I’d be forced to make another run for it—and this time, I’d have to run out of *my own house*. No way.

“That...wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“Actually, you’re right. Things could get awkward,” Shimamura muttered, her eyes wide in some sort of realization.

“Huh?”

But she ignored me. “Sure, we can do it at my house. Just be warned: It’s *really* dusty.”

Why was she so hung up on the dust factor? Was her house really that old? Because I was pretty sure it wasn’t.

Together, we left the classroom—something that was still fresh and novel to me at this point. As we stepped out into the hallway, I felt a strange weight on my shoulders...or maybe it was just the weight of my self-conscious mind, which is to say, maybe I was just really nervous.

I was walking on Shimamura’s left side, next to her free hand. Not that I really cared or anything.

I glanced down at it. It was just dangling there, bored. I started to reach for it...but then I stopped myself and glanced around. We were at school, in the middle of the hallway, surrounded by people we knew. If I grabbed her hand right now, she’d probably pull away.

It was easy to forget, but Shimamura wasn’t an especially warmhearted person; she was just very tolerant. But even *she* wouldn’t tolerate me trying to hold her hand at school.

So instead, I pretended I was just stretching my arms.

Together, we rode on my bike all the way to her house. In winter, the sun was quick to vanish beneath the horizon, and the garden lamps were flickering to life on the lawn by the time we arrived. I could already tell it would be pitch-black outside by the time I headed home... What time would that be, anyway? How long could I stay without it being weird? *I don’t remember how this is supposed to work.*

I encountered this problem a lot when it came to Shimamura. I knew the rules of normal friendship, but I didn’t *want* to be a normal friend—I wanted to be *special*. I did not, however, know the rules of

special friendship. Here in the dark, recklessness looked an awful lot like courage, and as a result, I frequently made an ass of myself. Afterwards I would scream into my pillow and...you know... *whaddafaaa* about it.

Here I was, cognizant of all this, yet still unable to do a single thing about it. *This crush is terminal.*

“Oh god, she’s home,” Shimamura groaned as she peered through the gap between her house and the garage, where a bright orange bicycle was currently parked. Apparently that was the one her mother supposedly rode everywhere—which was why she couldn’t take it to school, or so she’d explained to me a while back. “I’m hooooome!” she called out as she pounded on the front door.

A few moments later, I heard footsteps thumping in our direction from inside. Then the lock clicked, and the door opened to reveal...Mrs. Shimamura. Her skin was faintly flushed, and her hair was damp. Evidently she was fresh out of the tub.

“Welcome home... Oh! Friend! Oh! Visit!”

She reacted with surprise not once, but twice. The first time made sense, but the second I didn’t really get. Was it supposed to be like, “Oh, your friend is here to visit”?

Shimamura scowled and walked past her into the entryway to take her shoes off. “We’re gonna study, so don’t bother us.”

“You’re Adachi-chan, right?” Mrs. Shimamura asked, casually ignoring her daughter.

“Hello again,” I greeted her, inclining my head slightly as I removed my shoes and set them neatly next to Shimamura’s. Meanwhile, Shimamura’s scowl deepened. It was rare to see her so sulky, and I couldn’t help but stare. In my experience, she almost never wore her emotions on her sleeve like that... Clearly her family members had special access to the real her.

Lucky, I thought to myself. I envied her for having such a nice family...and I envied her family for having her.

“Satisfied? Now go away!”

“Oh, don’t be such a hormonal teenager.”

Just then, I felt someone’s gaze on me and turned my head. There, at the end of the hall, Little Shimamura was peeking out from behind

her bedroom door, watching me. When we made eye contact, however, she hastily disappeared inside. According to her older sister, she was a “total brat,” but in my eyes, she really didn’t look the part. She just seemed shy, the same way I was at her age.

Did her little school friends call her “Shimamura,” too?

“Come on, let’s just go. Shoo!” Shimamura shouted, waving her mother away as she climbed the stairs to the right of the hallway... *Wait, what? I thought your room was on the first floor!* I stood there, confused, until she gestured for me to follow her, at which point I gave up wondering and went up after her.

The stairs were a bit steeper than I was expecting. At the top was a short hallway with bare walls, save for a single door at the end. Shimamura led me inside. As I crossed the threshold, I instantly felt the lack of humidity in the air, and a moment later I noticed the dust floating around right in front of my face.

Coughing, Shimamura tugged on the lamp cord. After two flickers, it clicked on, illuminating the room. An assortment of miscellaneous furniture and old, frayed cardboard boxes came into view. In the far corner, a beat-up leather chair lay in pieces, missing its screws. The window was concealed behind some old, moth-eaten curtains. Maybe the lack of natural light explained why the room’s interior felt even gloomier than the empty hallway.

For some reason, this storage room was outfitted with both a kotatsu table *and* an electric fan, like they were trying to cover all the basic necessities with the bare minimum. I got the sense this room’s only real purpose was to enable Shimamura to stay up late studying whenever the necessity arose.

“See? Told you it was dusty.” She set her bookbag down and switched on the kotatsu heater. I heard it groan to life a moment later. “Brrrrr!” she murmured as she slid in under the blanket.

Once she was settled, I walked over and sat opposite her.

“Need me to go get you a cushion?” she asked.

“Nah, I’m good,” I replied, waving my hand dismissively.

There was no carpet or rug, just ice-cold hardwood, and my thighs were freezing, but I didn’t want to make her get back up again. Then I noticed a blue happi coat lying folded on the floor nearby. Curious, I

picked it up, and Shimamura looked over at me.

“Oh, I keep that around just in case my back gets cold,” she explained.

“Gotcha.”

“For now, let’s hang out for a bit until we warm up.”

Using her bookbag as a pillow, Shimamura laid herself down on the floor and wriggled even deeper under the blanket. *Shouldn’t you change out of your uniform first?* At this point, I wasn’t really sure what to do. I didn’t feel like hitting the books without her, but the kotatsu was too small to accommodate more than one sleeper. Her feet were already touching mine.

You know...maybe this place isn’t so bad. The room was dusty and cluttered and quiet, reminiscent of a secret hideaway untouched by any intruders. *This might just be the perfect place to migrate for the winter,* I thought to myself as I shivered, waiting patiently for the table heater to do its job.

“Do you listen to music when you study?” Shimamura asked without looking at me. I thought for a moment.

“Yeah, usually.”

Now that I actually stopped to think about it, it occurred to me that I put music on almost every time I broke out my textbooks—including yesterday, where I lasted for about thirty minutes before I got distracted and started agonizing over Christmas to the point of having a migraine. Of course, I could already picture what would happen if I told her that: She’d look away awkwardly and say “Oh...that sucks.” End of conversation.

“That’s cool. I hear that’s really common.”

“Yeah, probably.”

“Hmm...”

Her interest was starting to fade, and if I did nothing, the conversation would peter out like usual. But today I decided to be a little more persistent.

“What were you like as a kid?” I asked—a question I’d been contemplating since yesterday. This was one of the potential topics of conversation I’d come up with for whenever we ran out of things to talk

about.

“I dunno... Normal? Probably the same as I am now,” she shrugged.

In my mind, I envisioned a miniature version of Shimamura. Then I imagined myself taking her by the hand and walking down the street. It didn’t really fit. *Yeah, it only makes sense the other way around.*

“I was never the star athlete or the class president. The most I did was school lunch committee. That’s all I can really remember.”

She talked about herself the same way one would try to remember a classmate they never spoke to.

“Oh, but my hair was shorter back then. And I didn’t bleach it.”

She picked idly at her chestnut-colored bangs. In other words, her hair would’ve looked like her sister’s, I guess? I imagined her with shorter hair, then imagined her with darker hair.

“What about you?” she asked, though I got the sense she only asked out of obligation.

“Yeah, same as I am now, I think,” I replied vaguely.

“Same as now, hmm?” Shimamura closed her eyes. “I bet you always wanted the preschool teacher to hold your hand,” she teased, a mischievous smile playing at her lips. Apparently she was utterly convinced that I was some kind of needy little baby.

“I’m not like that, you know.”

“Like what?”

“You know...um...”

I stopped short. Unexpectedly, I was too embarrassed to say the word *needy* out loud. Considering I had both grabbed her hand *and* asked her to pet me within the past couple of months, perhaps I couldn’t exactly deny it. It didn’t sound convincing in my head.

“I don’t...I don’t act that way with just *anyone*.”

As soon as the words left my lips, I realized the implication: that I wanted her, and *only* her, to hold hands with me and pet me. I may as well have confessed my love—*No! No, no, no!*

“Hmmm...why me?” Shimamura wondered quietly. Did the thought bother her? Her voice sounded sort of...feeble.

The answer was simple, of course. *Because you're you. That's how love works.* At least, I remembered someone once said something along those lines. Or maybe I read it in a book. Or maybe I spontaneously came up with it just now as an excuse.

I couldn't bring myself to look up from the floor. If I told her the truth, it'd come off the exact same as if I were to hold up a giant sign that read I'M NUTS ABOUT YOU. I groaned under my breath, conflicted. The silence was killing me. *No matter what you have to say, I can take it. Please, just say something!*

Finally, once I'd summoned all my courage, I looked up. There, across the table, I found her lying still...a peaceful expression on her face...her eyes closed...her breathing slow and rhythmic. I stared at her for a moment.

She was asleep.

Was that why her voice had sounded so feeble? Because she was sleepy? Careful not to make a sound, I slid out from under the blanket and snuck around to the other side of the table. First, I knelt beside her...

Wait, what? "First"? What am I getting ready to do?

Hesitantly, I peered down at her. Her pleasant smile had faded; her expression was now blissfully unguarded in her slumber. The more I looked at her, the more restless I felt. My whole face felt like it was on fire. This was a rare opportunity to see Shimamura at her most vulnerable—almost like there was a little hole in the walls she built around herself, and now I could see through to the inside. I felt guilty for peeking, but at the same time, I couldn't tear my eyes away.

What do I do now?

We were supposed to be studying. Of course, no amount of studying would help us now—it was just a convenient excuse to hang out. But sitting here staring at her felt like kind of a waste. A *"waste?"* *Of what? Am I supposed to prank her or something?*

Suddenly, I became very conscious of her lips. They were a little chapped, probably from the dry winter air. I reached out to touch them, then immediately drew my hand back. Instead, on a whim, I leaned forward a tiny bit.

We were alone, and Shimamura was asleep. This was the perfect

opportunity to kiss her...if I wanted to...you know, as an experiment... My head began to spin as my mind filled with static. I could feel a headache coming on.

No, no, no! Snap out of it! I smacked myself hard on the forehead. There was no guarantee she'd stay asleep for the next twenty-four hours! If she woke up while I was kissing her, my whole life would be over! Besides, it wasn't like I *wanted* to kiss her; I was just willing to consider the idea—you know, if she asked. And those were very different things. I didn't want to put my lips on hers. I wanted her to *want* me to do it.

As I waffled back and forth, Shimamura opened her eyes slightly and looked at me. I stiffened. Was she wondering what I was doing, kneeling next to her?

"Mmm..."

Then she grabbed my thighs and wriggled her body over in my direction. *What?! What's going on?!* I shrieked internally. Then she laid her head down on my lap, shifted around slightly, and closed her eyes once more.

"There we go. Much comfier." She smiled sleepily. Apparently she wanted a pillow.

I wanted to casually brush it off with something like *Oh, okay, that's cool*, but my mouth wouldn't work. My cheeks were so hot, you'd think I'd pressed them directly against the heater.



“You, uh, you must be pretty sleepy, huh?” I stammered.

“Mmm...no... I’m not sleepy... I’m awake,” she murmured, her voice muffled by my thigh. To her credit, her eyes were open, at least. “You sure you’re not cold?” she asked.

“Nah, I’m fine.”

“Oh yeah. Want my coat?”

Without getting up, Shimamura felt around on the floor for the blue happi coat. Once she found it, she lifted it up, and since she was offering, I figured *sure, why not*.

“Okay.”

I took it and pulled it on over my uniform. With all the layers I was wearing, I felt like a marshmallow. Plus, I could feel myself starting to sweat, but that was probably from nerves more than anything.

“So tell me, uh, what do you usually do for Christmas?” I asked casually. My voice nearly cracked, but I continued to play it cool.

She turned her head, her squished cheek shifting back to its normal position, and looked up at me sleepily. “We have chicken karaage for dinner, then cake for dessert. No candles, though.”

“Gotcha. Sounds like pretty standard stuff.”

Not that I’d tallied up the statistics or anything, but it struck me as the most traditional way to celebrate Christmas in Japan. Whether it was homemade karaage or takeout from KFC or Mos Burger, everybody ate chicken in some form or another. Other countries ate turkey, but not us.

“My sister still believes in Santa Claus, and she still gets Christmas presents.”

“Awww, that’s cute!” *Man, that takes me back. Sounds like Nee-chan’s not a believer, though.* “How old were you when you found out he wasn’t real?”

“I never thought he was real,” she replied curtly. “I mean, what kind of jolly old man travels around the world to give out free stuff? You know?”

Classic Shimamura—tolerant, but not warmhearted. *This sure is a productive study session we’re having.*

“What about you?” she asked.

“I thought Santa worked at my preschool.”

“What? Why?”

“Probably because the teachers there were the only grown-ups who ever talked about him.”

My mom sure as hell didn’t talk about Santa Claus. One year, she asked me what I wanted for Christmas. I had lots of ideas, but I couldn’t decide on one specific thing, so I didn’t answer...and after that, she never asked me again. I guess she assumed I just didn’t want anything.

“We both had kinda crappy childhoods, huh?”

“Yeah, maybe,” I agreed. Technically we were still children, but whatever.

“At least back then I didn’t have to use my brain, you know? I could just live my life however I wanted... Honestly, it’s a miracle I survived this long. Those were the days...back when back pain was just a thing grown-ups had...”

She closed her eyes and reminisced, smiling faintly as she enjoyed my thighs. Her wording suggested she wished she could go back, and for once, it felt like she had revealed her more childish side. Was this a side effect of lounging in my lap? Apparently I was just as comfortable as a kotatsu.

Before I knew it, my nerves had faded and my body had gotten my temperature under control. It was like we were back in the gym loft, except the usual lethargy I felt was nowhere to be seen...and I wished we could stay like this forever.

“...Forget it.”

My plan was to ease into the topic of Christmas, then ask her to hang out...but I decided it could wait until some other time. For now, I just wanted to cherish this moment while it lasted.

I was the mother robin, keeping watch over my nest.

Interlude: A Visit to the Butcher's Shop Part 1

GROWING UP, I was taught to always be honest. So when a customer walked in looking to buy menchi-katsu, I told them the grocery store across the street was selling the same product at half-price for their night market event. I'd seen an ad for it in the paper. But when my dad overheard me telling them, he smacked me over the head. That was how I learned that no good deed goes unpunished.

Honestly, it's his fault for making me run the store in the first place. I swear, he never learns.

You'd think my parents would give me a day off now that finals were coming up, but alas. That said, if they *had* given me the day off, I can't guarantee I would've spent it studying. Nah, I probably would've crawled under the kotatsu to take a nap. Maybe they knew me too well. I looked out the window.

"Oh, here she comes again."

Across the street, I saw a small figure dart out from between the closed-down cigarette shop and the building next to it—a weird little girl with bright blue hair. She waved at us gleefully with both hands as she ran over to the store. Lately she came by every evening, always to buy the same thing.

Sure enough, she walked into the store, stood on her tiptoes, and held up three stubby little fingers.

"I'd like three croquettes, please."

"The usual? Coming right up."

This time I didn't mention the night market. Instead, I passed the order on to the kitchen, where my dad dished up three croquettes fresh out of the fryer. I took them, nestled them into a to-go container, and handed them to the girl in exchange for her coins. Without missing a beat, she opened the lid and devoured one right there on the spot.

"Sho good!"

Satisfied, she walked out, crossed the street, and disappeared between the buildings once more. Idly, I wondered to myself whether she came here for fun, or if her parents had sent her. But no matter how many times she came by, my poor dad could never quite get used to seeing her around. He always froze up like a deer in headlights.

Apparently she was friends with Hino. No surprise there—Hino had a lot of weird friends. Not me, though. I was normal.

Once my mom finished her chores, she walked out to the counter and told me she'd take over for me, so I was free to go back into the house. And since I was an honest girl living an honest life, I did as I was told.

Before I left, however, I looked up at the sign hanging overhead: NAGAFUJI'S MEATS. Always made me hungry just looking at it—especially the "MEATS" part. I liked to look at it every time I came home. Come to think of it, maybe this sign was what inspired my childhood nickname, "Beefuji." The longer I gazed at it, the hungrier I got, so I decided to hurry on inside.

Once I passed through the threshold in the back of the store, I kicked off my shoes and stepped into the living room. After the lunch rush, the whole house would always smell like fryer oil. Since I lived here, I never really noticed it, but one of my friends would always say it made her hungry. As it happened, that friend—Hino—was currently lounging under our kotatsu table, eating kidney beans and watching TV.

As I entered, she turned and looked at me. Then she grinned and handed me her empty Styrofoam container.

"Gimme a refill!"

"Go home."

I ignored her demand, walked around to the other side of the table, and slid in. Hino turned back to the TV. *Why does she spend so much time at my house?* One minute we were just two kids who went to the same preschool, and then she came over to my house one day and ate croquettes with me. I don't remember how we met, but I remember we used to call each other by our first names. Then at some point early on in elementary school, we switched to last names and kept it that way.

Hino was really short back then. Not once did she ever outgrow me in terms of height.

“How come you never get any taller, anyway?” I mused aloud, gazing at her pensively.

“You wanna go, punk?!” She reached out for my chest, but I smacked her hand away.

Come to think of it, she preferred fish over red meat—could that be it? Was it the fish? *That’s hilarious*. Then again, my mom loved fish too, and she was *huge*. Maybe Hino just wasn’t trying hard enough. Not like it really mattered how tall she was, anyway. She was always somewhere nearby, so I didn’t have to search for her too hard.

Then it occurred to me: Looking back, I’d managed to memorize Hino’s name really quickly, hadn’t I? Maybe I was just excited to make my very first friend. Now, though? Now I was used to her the same way I was used to the smell of fryer oil—her presence was a given. Not like anybody ever really paid attention to the air they were breathing, you know?

“Have you ever forgotten what my name is?” I asked.

“...You seriously think I’m stupid, don’t you?” She sat up, leaned forward, and rested her chin on the table, all the while glaring at me. For some reason she kept arriving at this same conclusion, even though it wasn’t my intention at all. Better question: Why did everyone seem to think *I* was stupid? It was a total mystery.

“Oh yeah, and there was that other thing,” I mused to myself as I reminisced. *Gosh, that takes me back*. I couldn’t remember why we used to do it, but oh well. I decided to give it a try.

I slid out from under the kotatsu and beckoned to her. “Come here for a sec.” Then I took my glasses off. Back in those days, my eyesight was a lot better.

“What do you want? You gonna give me something?”

“Yeah.”

“Ooh, really?” She crawled on all fours in my direction. Was she hoping for more kidney beans? *What a little scamp*. I reached out to her.

“Wha—?”

Then I lifted up her bangs and pressed my lips to her little forehead. Sure enough, it was every bit as firm as it was back then. A little chilly, though. ’Tis the season and all that.

Hino froze for a moment. Then I gave her a lick, and she jumped backwards, leaning her entire upper body away from me. Eyes wide, she reached up and touched her forehead. This wasn't the reaction I was expecting. Back in the day, she'd always get her revenge by doing it right back. We'd spend the whole day doing it, too.

"Wh-where did that come from?!"

"Oh, I was just thinking about how we used to do that all the time when we were little."

Hino's eyes darted around nervously. "Oh...right...gotcha. But we're not kids anymore, y'know? We're...uhh..."

"So? Has anything really changed?" I asked.

She fell silent, glanced around a bit more, then slumped her shoulders in defeat. "Not really, no."

"We're the same as ever," I agreed.

She grinned, still holding her bangs up. And as I looked back at her, it all clicked.

Sure, maybe nobody ever paid attention to the air...but you could still feel it against your skin.

Chapter 3:

Abnormal ★ Adachi

“M*Y NAME IS Shima-chan, and when I grow up, I’m gonna get real big!”*

That was what I always used to tell people when I was little. It was my dream, I guess. Back then, all the other kids called me Shima-chan, and I loved it so much, I started referring to myself like that, too. Looking back, it was totally cringey.

Anyway, back on topic. At some point during the later years of preschool, they asked us all what we wanted to be when we grew up, and that was my answer. I don’t remember what I meant by “big,” either. Maybe I wanted to be really tall.

How did I see the world back then?

Everything was so far above me—the sky, the grown-ups, all of it. I could run at full speed without needing to

stop and catch my breath, and I always made a beeline for anything that caught my interest. If something made me feel bad, all I needed was to eat some candy, and my worries would melt away with the sugar. Back then, I never got bogged down in the intricacies of complicated social interactions. Either we were friends or we weren’t—end of story.

Hard to believe I ever used to follow my heart and wear my emotions on my sleeve, but here we are.

Adachi was acting strange lately. I mean, sure, she’d always been a little odd at times, but this was a bird of an entirely different feather.

For starters, I caught her looking at me more often. I’d feel someone’s gaze on me in the middle of class, look over, and sure enough, our eyes would meet. Then she’d hastily stare down at her desk and open her textbook. You’d think she would’ve opened it at the start

of the lecture, but whatever. Anyway, that was Weird Thing #1.

Weird Thing #2: Whenever we talked, she'd start shaking. Her bottom lip would tremble, and her shoulders would get all jittery, almost like she was struggling to endure something...or hold something in. Seriously, you'd think her lips would get sore from that after a while. *Wait—no you wouldn't. That would be stupid. Never mind.*

Weird Thing #3: She scored higher than me on our English final. *Guess I know who to ask if I ever need an interpreter.* (That's a joke.)

If I had to guess, there was probably something on her mind—something she wanted to say or ask. Knowing that, I could always throw her a bone by asking her flat-out, but...part of me was scared I wouldn't like what came next. She had to be hesitating for a reason, after all.

Instead, I continued to watch and wait...but after three days, it was impossible to keep pretending not to see it. So I decided I would talk to her about it at lunch after class let out. Maybe it would turn out that my brain had hyped it up to be a lot more serious than it actually was. It felt like that was usually the case—not that I'd tallied up the statistics or anything.

So I decided that was what I would tell myself.

Once history class was over, the mood in the room softened significantly. We'd handed in our exams and answer sheets, and now the rest was out of our hands. All that remained was the closing ceremony, and then winter break would be upon us. This was the tiny lantern light at the end of the dark, chilly tunnel, and spirits were high.

Some people were laughing about how they'd bombed the test, while others were gushing about their Christmas plans with their special someone. *Christmas, huh...* In just ten days, we were due for another visit from everyone's favorite jolly old man.

My sister still seemed to believe he existed, and so she would inevitably get another gift from him. I, however, would receive nothing. Then my sister would gloat about how I was on "Santa's naughty list." This happened every year without fail. Personally, I liked to think I was

actually really nice for letting her off easy without any retaliation, but I digress.

I tucked my textbook back into my bag, then took out my wallet and rose to my feet. I could see Hino and Nagafuji opening their bento boxes out of the corner of my eye, but I ignored them and headed over to Adachi, who sat staring into space, her chin propped up on her elbow.

She was so lost in thought, she didn't even notice me approaching. This struck me as the perfect opportunity. I moved around behind her, then leaned down and rested my chin on her scalp. The next thing I knew, she bolted upright, slamming her skull into my jaw.

She was so startled, she tumbled to the floor. Pushing herself up with one hand, she whirled around to look up at me. Holding my chin, I met her gaze, tears welling in my eyes from the pain of having bitten my tongue.

"Oh, it's just you. That scared me..." She clutched at her chest and heaved a sigh of relief...except she didn't *look* very relieved at all. Her eyes kept darting around nervously. "What'd you do that for?"

"I was just messing with you! Agh...that hurt..."

You'd think I would've learned my lesson after my sister did the same thing to me just the other day, but apparently not. I helped her to her feet, only to find that her dramatic reaction had drawn everyone's attention right to us. She noticed this, too, and shifted awkwardly. Since this was obviously at least partially my fault, I decided I would escort her out of here. Leading her by the hand, I dragged her out into the hallway.

"What? Wh-what is it?"

Her gaze wandered, and her cheeks seemed flushed—probably from the sudden scare. I let go of her hand and clapped her on the shoulder. "Deep breaths."

Leaning against the wall, she did as I suggested, her chest rising and falling as she inhaled and exhaled. But her gaze was still flitting around, so evidently it wasn't having the desired effect on her. I decided to give her a few more minutes.

With each breath, her face seemed to burn brighter and brighter. Was it fanning the fire in there? *That'd be pretty cool.*

The longer we stood there with my hand on her shoulder, the more noticeable it became just how much taller she was compared to me. I'd known this for a while, of course, but part of me was hoping I'd close the gap over time. Not that I felt threatened and wanted to compete with her or anything like that. It just felt weird to have this much taller girl calling me *onee-chan* and asking me to pet her. Seriously, our whole friendship was so bizarre.

Since the deep breathing didn't seem to be helping her, I pulled my hand away and casually contemplated some other way to calm her down. But before I could think of anything, Adachi's panic seemed to abate. Her gaze stopped wandering, and the blush faded from her cheeks. *There we go.* Now we could finally have a conversation.

If only I hadn't spooked her, we wouldn't have wasted all this time, but oh well.

"Hey there, Ada-cheechee," I said, putting on my best Hino impression to lighten the mood.

"Can't you just call me by my name?" she grumbled, and I seemed to remember her making this request of me in the past, too. Or maybe not.

"Relax. I'm probably not going to make a habit of it. Anyway..."

I started to invite her to lunch, but then I thought about the current state of my tongue and thought better of it. I'd already suffered enough. In my mind, I could hear my mom's voice: *That's what you get for messing around!*

My mouth still tasted of copper, and I got the feeling this "extra seasoning" wouldn't improve the flavor of my lunch.

"I was just wondering what's going on with you lately."

"What do you mean?"

Instead of beating around the bush, I decided to cut to the chase. "Well, um...you seem to be looking at me an awful lot."

She averted her gaze. Her expression didn't shift a fraction, but her eyes gave it all away. "Do I really?"

"Yes, you do," I insisted.

I circled around and positioned myself within her line of sight. Startled, she turned in the opposite direction, so I moved again. This

process repeated for a good three or so times before I gave up and moved on to my next question.

“Is there something you’d like to say to me?”

Her tightly pursed lips twitched stiffly. “Well...maybe...”

“Out with it, then.”

I was dying to get this over with. My best guess was that she had a bone to pick with me—in which case it didn’t really make sense that I was encouraging her to complain to me, but whatever.

Then she startled to mumble to herself. *I can’t hear you! Speak up!*

“It’s just, um...I was thinking...maybe sometime this winter...like, next week...or more like...ten days from now...um...”

Fidgeting, she rambled under her breath. Then she stopped to cough, and pounded herself hard on the chest, almost like the words were stuck in her throat. The girl was a total mess, reminiscent of a flustered little chicken who needed to get a running start before achieving liftoff. Except chickens couldn’t actually fly. *Sad.*

She turned to face me, her gaze pointed in an entirely different direction, and announced, “I just need a little more courage—I mean, time to think it through. Then I’ll say it.”

“...Okay.”

Apparently those words in her throat weren’t getting unstuck anytime soon. *Oh well, I guess.* Now I was starting to get kind of worried. What if whatever she had to say was really heartbreaking? Then again, was my heart even fragile enough to break?

Then she started shuffling her feet like she wanted to get going, so I stepped out of her way, and sure enough, she walked—no, *jogged*—right back into the classroom. Belatedly, I noticed the chill in the hallway and shivered slightly. This shook something loose in my mind—a fuzzy little memory of brighter days.

That was the moment I remembered an old friend I used to have.

In preschool, back when I was pure and innocent, I had this one

really close friend. Put simply, she was a lot like Adachi—and no, this isn't the setup to a big reveal where it turns out she *was* Adachi. For one thing, her name was different, and for another thing, there was no star-crossed destiny that brought me and Adachi together.

In those days, I was ridiculously proactive and completely unguarded. The word “wait” didn't exist in my vocabulary. My friend, on the other hand, would always follow along right behind me—always *behind* me, never *beside* me—like she was my shadow. Looking back, maybe she was trying to hide back there. She was really shy, and on the first day of preschool, I remember seeing her near the front gates, clinging to her mother and sobbing.

As I passed by, I stopped and walked right up to her for some reason. Then I took her by the hand and led her to the shoe lockers, and that's how we first met. These days, though, I'd probably walk right on by without a second glance.

Then I introduced myself, and she started calling me “Shima-chan.” From there, the nickname spread around to the other kids. I can still remember the way she pouted when she found out other people were using it. That was the sort of thing that reminded me of Adachi. Then again, since I met her first, perhaps it was *Adachi* who reminded me of *her*. But these days, Adachi came to mind much more readily than she did. My preschool friend was just that: an old friend from preschool.

Back then, I loved having a little wallflower follow me around. It made me feel like an intrepid explorer leading an expedition. Stupid, I know. I was completely full of myself. To me, the neighborhood around the preschool was uncharted territory, full of traps and pitfalls we needed to avoid. A rational person might ask, *why would there be traps in “uncharted” territory?* Couldn't tell you. Little me didn't think too hard about it. All I cared about was running around the playground with my friend in tow.

My friend, however, did *not* enjoy running around. In fact, she downright hated it. But at the time, I was too focused on myself to notice. Looking back, I was a really selfish kid... Then again, maybe I still am. My outlook may have changed, but I still always put myself first.

My friend wasn't the most expressive or assertive, but she did have hobbies and interests of her own. I remember she loved beads, marbles, and anything sparkly. Anytime she spotted something that fit

the bill, she'd dash out from under my shadow and make a beeline right to it. Then I'd end up chasing after *her* instead. Part of me would always get mad at her and think, *I'm sparkly too, y'know!* No idea why I felt this way, but I did.

When we started elementary school, however, the two of us ended up assigned to different classes, and after that, we never saw each other again. We didn't have a fight or anything; our friendship just couldn't survive the distance. In my case, I quickly forgot about her.

Years later, I heard through the grapevine that she'd turned into a total delinquent in junior high. Not some wannabe like me or Adachi—a real, bona fide delinquent. We'd long since gone our separate ways, of course, but I couldn't help but be a tiny bit curious...

What sort of sparkle caught your eye, the day your path branched off from mine?

“Mehhhh...”

Collapsed on the kitchen table, I wrestled with my drowsiness.

“I sure don't see any wrestling,” my mother commented, prodding my head. Reluctantly, I sat up straight.

Winter made it impossibly difficult for me to wake up in the mornings. *Maybe my body wants to hibernate*, I thought to myself as I shivered. Fortunately the heater was on, but every now and then a gust of cold air would weasel its way under my PJs.

My cheek had left an imprint on the table. Idly, I erased it with my finger, and before I'd finished, breakfast was ready: miso stir-fry with pollock roe, konnyaku noodles, and bell peppers—leftovers from last night's dinner—plus some seasoned rice on the side. My father was worried that he would gain some weight over the winter holidays, so our meals had gotten healthier lately as a preventative measure.

The only person in our family who complained about it was my sister, since she was still a child and didn't understand diet culture. She had long since finished her food; now she was brushing her teeth in the bathroom. Apparently, her class was going to run a marathon first thing that morning. The mere thought exhausted me. Frankly, she deserved

an award for putting up with that nonsense.

“Look at her, ready for school and everything... Such a good girl... I’m proud...”

“Quit chewing your cud and hurry up so I can take your plate!”

My mother tapped the dishwasher impatiently. When I was little, it was always “slow down and chew your food before you swallow,” but now this? *Make up your mind. You’re sending your child mixed messages.*

Then my sister peeked into the kitchen, wearing her bright yellow elementary school hat. “I’m going to school, Mom!”

“All right, sweetheart. Be safe,” my mother replied. Then she turned and smirked at me. “You run along too, Nee-chan.”

“Ugh, shut up. I’m not a kid—I don’t have to be there until after sunrise.”

“Says who? You can pretend you’re in college all you want, missy, but you’ve still got three more years to go.”

She gave me another prod. Ultimately my epic comeback only backfired, and now my sister was laughing at me.

After she left, my mother took a seat across the table from me and groaned down at her grocery list. In order to plan what to buy at the store, she first had to plan out all of our meals. This was the part she was struggling with. She set down her ballpoint pen and let out a sigh.

“Meal planning is so much work. I hate having to do it every single day.”

“Yeah, I bet. Good luck with that.”

“Anything specific you want to have for dinner?”

Even if I answered this question, I knew my chances of it actually happening were slim. My mother liked to wander around the grocery store and change her meal plans on a whim, hence I didn’t bother actually getting my hopes up for anything.

“Just stick to curry or whatever.”

“Hmmm...maybe I could grab something from the butcher’s shop?”

“Sure. Knock yourself out.”

This conversation was a waste of my time. By “butcher’s shop,” I

assume she meant Nagafuji's Meats. Supposedly Nagafuji had to work the counter there from time to time... No idea if she was actually good at her job, though.

Suddenly, my sister came rushing back inside. Did she forget her lunch bag?

"*Nee-chan! Nee-chan!*"

Apparently not. She dashed into the kitchen and looked at me. She couldn't have been outside for more than five minutes, and yet her nose was already reddened from the chilly winter air.

"Your friend's here!"

"What?"

How many years had it been since I last heard those words? The concept was so alien to me, I struggled to process it. Instead, I chewed on it for a bit.

"My friend?" I repeated. For a split-second I contemplated asking her one of two potential follow-up questions, and in my panic, I chose the weirder of the two: "Where at?"

"Outside!" She pointed to the front door. *Duh, of course they're outside. Probably right out front.*

"Who is it?"

"That one girl who came over that one time."

"...Adachi?"

What would Adachi be doing at my house before school? *There's no way she could've wandered here by accident, right? She's not that ditz.* Regardless of her reasons, I knew she had to be waiting for me, so I decided to go see for myself. I left my dishes on the table, rose from my chair, and walked out of the kitchen. My sister followed along after me.

I'd forgotten to put my slippers back on, which meant I had to walk on icy hardwood with my bare feet. The warmth from the kitchen all but evaporated, and I could practically hear my breath freezing solid in mid-air. Worse, it clung to my face and made me even colder, a thing I didn't know was possible.

"Aagaaahhh," I groaned under my breath, wrapping one arm around myself for warmth as I opened the door and stepped outside. Sure enough, Adachi was there, standing astride her blue bicycle like

she was here to pick me up. She was wearing her uniform, and her bookbag was in the front basket. When she noticed me, she awkwardly waddled forward with the bike.

In the mornings, our street was always “chock-full of little brats,” as my parents put it, and today was no exception. Out on the sidewalk, a handful of grade-schoolers were passing by on their way to school. Gripping the handlebars, Adachi shuffled along with her bike, taking care to give them as much space as possible. She stared mostly at the ground, shooting the occasional furtive glance in my direction.

“Well, it doesn’t appear to be an emergency... Wonder what she wants,” I mused aloud. Then I turned to find my sister watching from a safe distance behind me, so I gestured for her to run along to school.

She walked forward reluctantly, glancing back at me multiple times, until she eventually reached the sidewalk. There, with a final parting wave, she joined the crowd of grade-schoolers and vanished down the street.

I waved back at her, and after she was gone, I waved next at my *other* “little sister.” She continued to slowly work her way towards me until we were just a few feet apart. Then I noticed that her hand was raised. *Did she wave to my sister, too? Classic Adachi.*

“Hey there, Adachi.”

“Uh...’sup, dude?”

“Why do you sound like a surfer...?” Maybe that was her idea of what a cool person sounded like.

It was my first time meeting up with her this early in the morning, which made for a fun change. Her hair was neatly brushed, and her uniform was picture-perfect. In contrast, I was rocking pajamas and a massive case of bedhead. *Eh, who cares*, I thought, rubbing my eyes. I could do what she did to me and make her wait outside for fifteen minutes while I got dressed, but in winter, that’d be downright cruel. Still, I got the feeling Adachi would’ve done it to me no matter the season.

“So, what’s up? Aren’t you a little early this morning? Wait...what time did you get here?” I asked, dumping all my questions on her at once.

Exhaling a little puff of white fog, Adachi looked away. “One, I

wanted to talk to you; two, this isn't all that early to me; and three, just now," she responded in order.

You could tell she was the responsible type deep down—after all, she always answered my questions, even weird ones like when I asked her about sit-ups. Was she telling the truth about the last one, though...?

"Hmmm..."

I reached out and cupped her cheek. Startled, she flinched, and her eyes widened reflexively. This, in turn, startled me right back. Regardless, I turned my attention to the temperature of her skin, which was much, much colder than my hand—probably from the wind chill during her ride over. Her nose and cheeks were so red, you'd think she was smuggling tomatoes in there.

Ultimately, there were parts of the human body that simply couldn't be shielded from the cold. Plus, I was cold, too. So I grabbed her by the wrist.

"It's freezing out here. Let's talk inside."

"W-wait!"

I pulled her off her bike, leaned it up against the interior wall of the garage, then dragged her into the house. At first she seemed confused and resistant, but this quickly faded, and once we were inside, she took her shoes off by the door. Once we reached the hallway, I wasn't sure where to take her...but then I remembered that I hadn't finished my breakfast.

"Uh...thanks for having me," Adachi muttered in a feeble voice.

"No problem. Come on in," I replied casually as we entered the kitchen. "I'm back!" I called to my mom, who sat collapsed in her chair with her legs splayed out.

"That was fast... Oh, you've brought your friend!" Now that she had an audience, she leapt to attention.

Adachi inclined her head in greeting. "Sorry for the intrusion."

"Don't be! Come on in!" my mother exclaimed, echoing my earlier sentiment. *Ugh, don't copy me.*

I closed the door behind us, then returned to my seat at the dining table. Meanwhile, Adachi hovered timidly near the entrance. I gestured

to the chair where my sister had been sitting. “Why don’t you have a seat?”

“Sure,” she replied as she took me up on my suggestion, setting her bookbag down next to her on the floor.

Adachi was now sitting at my kitchen table. It felt so *wrong*. She looked really uncomfortable, too. The only one having a good time right now was my mother.

“Say, Adachi-chan, could you help my daughter finish her food? She chews like a cow.”

“Ugh! Don’t embarrass me!” Eager to rush off to my room as quickly as possible, I stuffed my mouth full of bell peppers and rice.

“Oh, no, I already had breakfast,” Adachi replied politely. *Just ignore her, Adachi!*

“Right, of course. I should have guessed. What did you have? Anything good?” my mother continued, leaning forward in her chair. *Why do you care, Mom?* Clearly she was just messing around, but Adachi looked like she was a little freaked out.

“Bread,” Adachi answered as she loosened her scarf.

What, like a slice of toast? Or maybe she means one of those little round buns? Either way, that was a ridiculously small breakfast. Knowing her, she washed it down with nothing but plain water, too.

What are you, a plant? Do you get all your nutrition from photosynthesis? Well, at least that way you can save money on food, I guess.

Come to think of it, now that I was actually going to class like a good kid, surely I’d earned the privilege of having Mom make lunch for me again. My bento box was practically gathering dust up there on the shelf.

“Doesn’t anyone tell you you’re not getting enough to eat? Surely your mother does, at least. I know it’s normal for a young lady to count her calories, but the less you eat, the more we moms start to worry. If anything, a little pudgy lets us know you’re healthy!”

For some reason my mother glanced at me as she said this. Was she suggesting she was worried about my calorie intake, or was she suggesting I had “a little pudgy”? Should I be offended? I was tempted to ask, but my mouth was full of food.

Adachi snuck a glance at my stomach—I saw that, thank you very much!—then muttered, “No, she doesn’t. She’s hardly ever home, so we don’t really talk.”

Fortunately, even my mother could take a hint. “Oh, I see.” She sat back in her chair.

Adachi’s relationship with her mother had yet to show any signs of positive change. Evidently real life wasn’t like the movies, where one deep conversation could have a dramatic ripple effect. Nor had my grades magically improved. And if we couldn’t sprout wings and take flight, then we’d just have to walk on our own two feet, even if it meant we lagged behind everyone else.

The rest of our time in the kitchen was spent in silence while I finished my food. As soon as I was done, I bolted from the room; Adachi jumped out of her chair, hastily pushed it in, then followed suit. *Oh God, she really is turning into my little sister.*

“You better actually go to school! No playing hooky with your friend, you hear me?” my mom called as I left.

“Yes, I know! I won’t! I’m going to school, Mom!” I shouted back at her as I headed to my bedroom. I turned back to find Adachi smiling slightly. “What’s so funny?” I demanded, even though I had a feeling I knew the answer.

“Nothing,” she replied, still smiling.

Inside my room, the curtains were wide open and sunlight was streaming in...but though it may have *looked* warm and inviting, it was still every bit as cold as the rest of the house. I debated whether to turn on the heater, then decided “screw it” and flipped the switch. I knew we couldn’t stick around for too much longer, and the toasty warmth would only make me even *less* excited to go outside, but I wanted to be a hospitable hostess for my guest.

Our futons were already folded up, so I plopped down on top of them, then tossed Adachi a yellow floor cushion. I felt a tiny hint of warmth from the ray of sunlight hitting my back, but my front side was still freezing. Restless, I bounced up and down on the futons. Adachi re-wrapped her scarf around her neck and glanced nervously around the room, almost like it was her first visit all over again. *Chill.*

“Soooo what did you want to talk about? Is it the thing from yesterday?” *Have you finally “thought it through” or whatever?*

At this, Adachi looked up, one hand adjusting her bangs. Her eyes were a little bloodshot, and her complexion was pale. Had she stayed up all night thinking about it, or what? Now I was starting to feel bad for pressuring her.

“Shimamura?”

“Yeah?”

“Would you wanna...hang out or something?” She averted her gaze.

“Uhhh...sure...?” I blinked. *What? That’s it? That’s the question you’ve been agonizing over this whole time? What part of that was so stressful for you?*

I was expecting something a lot worse, so this honestly kind of threw me for a loop. I mean, why not just ask me at school or over email? Why come all the way to my house to ask me in person? *God, I don’t understand her anymore. Then again, I guess I never have.*

“Sure, I don’t mind. When? After school, or...did you wanna skip?”

“Oh, um, actually, I didn’t mean today,” she clarified.

“Okay...?”

As I waited for her to elaborate, she sat up straight on her floor cushion, so I followed suit. Then she put her hands in her lap and started to fidget. *Oh, come on. It shouldn’t be this hard for you to pick a day. What’s the matter with you?* Rubbing my leg idly, I waited. Meanwhile, she stared at the floor and blushed beet red.

“I was thinking maybe...the 25th...?”

“The 25th? Of this month? Hmm...”

I was expecting her to choose a day of the week rather than a specific date, so I didn’t put two and two together at first. Instead, I was busy trying to figure out whether the 25th was a weekday or a weekend. Then I remembered what month it was, and *then* I remembered what “December 25th” signified. I looked at her, my eyes wide. “The 25th?”

“Yeah.” She hunched over, still staring at the floor, her face half-buried in her scarf.

“As in Christmas Day?”

“Yeah.”

She nodded timidly, sitting perfectly still like she was bracing herself. Evidently she'd chosen that day on purpose, and for a reason... but for what? Why would she invite me to hang out on Christmas? And why would she blush about it? Was she asking me on a date or something? I was baffled.

Me and Adachi, together on Christmas?



“Hmmm...”

I closed my eyes.

I needed to choose my words carefully for this one. If I asked her “what for?” I could practically see our friendship crumbling to dust right before my eyes. It would take a lot of time and effort to repair that sort of damage. And if someone were to ask me if I was willing to go that far for her...honestly, I don’t think they’d like my answer. Thus, I decided not to ask why she wanted to spend time together.

Still...wasn’t it kind of odd for two girls to spend time together on Christmas? Then again, I didn’t really get out much, so maybe not. But I could easily understand why it had taken Adachi days to work up the courage to ask me. Regardless of her intentions, a question like that was bound to come across as really forward. So what *were* her intentions?

I had a feeling I knew the answer...and its intensity weighed on me like a ton of bricks.

Meanwhile, Adachi hung her head like she regretted the whole thing. She didn’t seem like she was planning to go into any more detail, so apparently the ball was in my court. *Oh, good grief. Well, if I can’t ask why, maybe I could ask something else.*

“Where would we go?”

“I haven’t thought about it yet,” she replied hastily.

“What would we do?”

“I haven’t thought about it yet!” she blurted out so fast, I wondered if she might actually break the sound barrier. (She didn’t.) “I haven’t gotten that far yet, but...would you...be interested?”

She flicked her gaze up at me tentatively. The heater was finally running, but maybe we didn’t need it anymore; I was too tense to feel the cold, and I got the sense she might feel similarly.

I could feel the warmth from the window strengthen and weaken against my back as the sun briefly disappeared behind a cloud. Time was ticking by, and yet the whole room felt frozen.

Adachi was...

For the first time in my life, my brain faltered mid-thought.

...Maybe Adachi just wanted to spend time with someone she cared about over the holidays, you know, since her family situation

kind of sucked. That's why she came to me—because I was (probably) her only friend. *Yeah, maybe that's it.*

I knew it was weird of me to feel the need to decode her behavior, but sometimes you just need a reason. And by “you,” I mean me.

I mean, how else was I meant to interpret her actions? Her blushing? Everything about it seemed to scream *I love you*. And that wasn't something I would be able to brush off casually.

“Ummmm...”

Smiling stiffly, I mildly regretted ever pressing her to speak her mind. If anything, I should've waited until after the 25th. But hindsight is 20/20, as they say. Now I was in an awkward position, and I didn't really know what to say.

Adachi lifted her heels slightly, like she was preparing to bolt again, and I fixed her with a look that said *you better say something before you take off this time*. She seemed to intuit this; faltering, she stammered out something akin to an explanation.

“Oh, uh, for the record, it's not a huge deal or anything. I just... you know...I'd like to spend Christmas—er, the holidays—doing something fun with someone, I think... No, definitely, yeah.”

“Hmmm...”

Maybe my guess wasn't so far off the mark, then. Maybe she really did just want someone around. Assuming she wasn't lying, of course. But it'd be rude of me to suspect a friend of lying to my face. And in this case, it would be more convenient for me if she was telling the truth, so I was inclined to believe her. Funny how that worked.

Normally it was her family's job to be around for her on Christmas, but as a teenager, asking for family time was super awkward. Probably even more so if your family was anything like Adachi's. That's why the duty had fallen to me—because she really didn't have anyone else.

See? I'm just her only option. What a relief.

And if Adachi just wanted *someone* around, not necessarily *me* specifically, then maybe there wasn't any harm in indulging her.

“I don't mind as long as I can be home by dinnertime,” I decided.

Instantly, she jumped upright and looked at me. “You mean it?”

“But you have to do all the planning stuff.”

I couldn't miss out on Christmas dinner or else my sister would get bummed out. Granted, this phase of her life would only last another two or three years at best, and then she wouldn't even notice my absence anymore. Hell, maybe she'd stop getting excited for Christmas altogether. But for right now, at least, it was her favorite holiday—and this was a sentiment she and Adachi seemed to have in common. *Yeah, that's probably it.* This interpretation made me feel much better about the whole thing.

Meanwhile, Adachi was swaying giddily from side to side, almost like she was wagging her tail. Except, you know, in this case her whole *body* was the tail. *Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle.* Her expression was looking much better, too: warm and bright, like the first few rays of sun after a long, cold winter. Our frozen time was moving once more.

In fact, her eyes were so damp with emotion, I half-wondered if she might just start weeping for joy. And the happier she got, the more I started to suspect... *No, no, no.* I shook the thought from my mind.

From my lofty position atop the piled futons, Adachi felt like my faithful canine companion. Breed name: the Adachi Inu. *Nailed it.*

Idly, my gaze wandered to the clock. We'd have to leave for school here soon, although we'd save some time if Adachi gave me another ride on the back of her bike. That said, I wasn't sure she was in any condition to ride a bike. Would she even remember to pay attention to the traffic signals? She was practically vibrating, and her lips were curled in a goofy smile. You'd think I'd be tempted to slap some sense into her, but instead I wanted to poke those goofy lips. Weird, I know.

“Oh!” She jumped to her feet, her face flushed bright red, like she was the very personification of a volcanic eruption. “We gotta go to school!”

Here she was, trying to play the good girl while her brain could barely function. I could tell because she was pointing at my sister's study desk the way a normal person would point at the clock.

“Oh, right. We'd better go.”

“Let's... Let's hurry! Time to hurry! To school!” she stammered, doing her best robot impression as she staggered stiffly down the hallway. I heard her kick her shoes on, followed by the sound of the front door whipping open. Why did she always have to dash out of my

house at the speed of light? *I command thee to halt!* I thought to myself like I was in some Shakespearean play.

“Don’t go! Let me ride on your bike!”

And here I thought I could take it easy this morning. I turned back and peered out of my window. Sure enough, she was pedaling off at full speed like she was fleeing the scene of a crime. Standing on the pedals, too, so you knew she was serious. If I was a cop, I would’ve pulled her over in a heartbeat.

It reminded me of the last time she ran out of my house. At least this time it definitely wasn’t my fault... Then again, she hadn’t exactly done anything wrong, either. Maybe it *was* my fault.

Just when my room was getting nice and toasty, she had to go and leave the front door open. Slowly but surely, the warm air drifted out—a silent suggestion for me to do the same.

“Hmmm...”

I closed my eyes and mulled it over one last time...then shrugged my shoulders and let it all go.

Sure, there was no star-crossed destiny that brought me and her together, but we *did* have a sturdy foundation we’d been building since day one.

And so it was decided that I would spend Christmas with Adachi this year.

Not like Santa Claus was bringing anything for me anyway.

Interlude: A Visit to the Butcher's Shop Part 2

DELI MASCOTS always made me uncomfortable. You know, like a cute little pig in a chef's uniform selling pork cutlets, or a smiling octopus cheerfully selling takoyaki.

"I mean, they're selling themselves as food! Why would they be happy about that? Like...it's hard to explain, but...it feels like these mascot animals are being appropriated against their will, if that makes sense? They're cute and all, but it just doesn't feel right. I kind of feel... guilty? Yeah. I feel guilty for enabling it."

"Wow, Hino. I didn't know you actually thought about that stuff."

"Some of us actually *use* our brains, y'know."

I gestured with my hand, and Nagafuji followed it with her gaze. She looked smart at first glance, but no one had ever actually complimented her on her intelligence. One time our teacher wrote "pretends to know what she's doing" on her report card. Naturally, her parents got offended and came to the school to complain. It was a bit of a scandal at the time. But Nagafuji herself didn't really care—she was too busy playing Mario Kart with me for the whole spring vacation.

"Don't worry, Hino. I understand where you're coming from. But for right now, let's try our best to come up with a cool mascot!"

"You don't understand a dang thing!"

As usual. But I was really just talking to myself, so I wasn't expecting her to reply.

When we got home from school (not that this is actually my home, for the record), Nagafuji's parents asked me to help design a mascot for the butcher's shop. I don't know whose idea this was, but I was happy to pitch in. After all, if I left the task to Nagafuji, who knows what kind of bizarro mascot they'd end up with. Clearly that was why they turned to me for help. I could already picture Nagafuji trying to make their butcher shop mascot a sea urchin or something. Not to mention she just finished drawing a ridiculously good sketch of a

parakeet for some reason.

The kotatsu table was covered in drawing paper and a veritable rainbow of colored markers, almost like we were kids again. Back then, Nagafuji loved to draw pictures of Salisbury steak. With mashed potatoes, of course.

“Any ideas?”

“Hmmm...how about Nagafuji-chan the Cow?”

“Let’s see it, then.”

Wait, what? Are you serious? I was joking! But there she was, peering at my drawing paper expectantly.

“Uhhh...one sec.”

I hadn’t actually thought this through, but I started drawing anyway. My right hand moved on autopilot, crafting a doodle of Nagafuji’s face. Well, a cartoony version of it, anyway.

“I feel like I recognize it from somewhere,” Nagafuji murmured as she stared down at it.

Don’t you people have at least one mirror? Or are you trying to say I suck at drawing? For that matter, shouldn’t the name “Nagafuji-chan” clue you in here?! Ugh, she always gets under my skin!

Was she playing dumb, or was she really that dense?

I was in junior high when I first realized there was something wrong with her—that she operated at a different speed compared to everyone else. She wasn’t stupid, but she *really* took her time with everything. In that sense, she was a lot like Shimamura, a friend we’d made earlier this year. In fact, maybe that was how we made friends with her so quickly. Unlike Shimamura, however, Nagafuji wasn’t really capable of reading the room or taking hints. Yeah, she could be a real handful at times.

I glanced down at my masterpiece, then back up at the real deal, and it occurred to me that I’d drawn her without her glasses. Evidently that was the “normal” Nagafuji in my mind’s eye.

“When did you start wearing glasses again?”

“Sixth grade. That’s when my eyesight took a nosedive.”

I wonder where it crash-landed. Maybe it slipped out one night while she was asleep, and then she rolled over and crushed it without

realizing. Or maybe she yawned too hard and it all trickled out in a single tear. That sort of silly anecdote fit perfectly with her character.

Sixth grade sounded about right, though. It felt like I'd known No-Glasses Nagafuji a lot longer than this new, bespectacled version. But every now and then she would take her glasses off for a while, seemingly at random. *I wonder what that's about.*

"So what does this have to do with our butcher shop?"

"Nothing, really... Okay, how about this one?"

I grabbed a blue marker and started sketching a cutesy cartoon caricature of a girl with bright blue hair, grinning and holding up a steamy croquette. Everyone always stared at her whenever she stopped by the store, so that had to count for something, right? Then again, maybe it would just be easier to hire her directly.

"We could call her Croquette-chan... Yeah, that sounds good. Let's go with that."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Shouldn't you think it through first?! And what kind of name is that?!"

"Now then, time for your reward."

Naturally, she ignored me, but whatever. *Hell yeah, I want a reward! Gimme, gimme! Wait...why does this feel so familiar?*

"You're not gonna kiss my forehead again, are you?"

"You mean you don't want me to?"

Does she actually think that's a reward? Weirdo. Like, does she think a kiss is more valuable than a snack or something? Ha ha ha. Seriously, what a weirdo.

"Well, okay. Go ahead."

I had to be pretty weird myself, considering I was willing to accept her offer. *Oh well.* I crawled out from under the kotatsu and lifted my bangs. Then she crawled over on all fours and leaned forward. With one hand, she cupped my chin; the other, she placed on mine, sandwiching it between warm skin and the cold floor.

Then she leaned in, and from the angle, I started to wonder if maybe she was planning to kiss me on the lips instead. My heart raced. But no—her chin tilted upwards, and she planted a kiss on my forehead, just as promised. Then I realized our legs were intertwined, too...almost

like she might push me down to the floor and have her way with me any moment now.

Several seconds ticked by as we held that position, like two marble statues or something. All I could see was the porcelain skin of her chin and throat. *Uh, hello? You fall asleep up there or something?* Not that I knew exactly how long a kiss was supposed to last, but still. Was she obligated to stay put for a certain length of time?

“You two sure are close.”

I jumped at the sudden voice—so hard, I made Nagafuji bite her lip.

“Gah!” Clutching her mouth, she pulled away from me.

It was Nagafuji’s mom, having just stepped in from the storefront. She looked at us with a weird little smile, and I felt mortified that she’d caught us in the act. But as much as I wanted to pull away, Nagafuji’s hand was still resting on mine, so I was stuck.

Mrs. Nagafuji walked up to the kotatsu, plopped down, and turned on the TV. Her daughter turned to the TV, too. *How can you people act so normal?!*

“Be sure to tidy all this up,” Mrs. Nagafuji told us.

“Yes, Mom,” Nagafuji replied. Then she turned to me.

I had so much I wanted to yell at her for, but with her mom in the same room, I knew I had to keep a lid on it. Instead, my frustration built and built until...

“Do you think we’re close?” she asked me.

“I dunno... Aren’t we just normal friends?” I replied, still wrestling with my embarrassment. But for some reason...Nagafuji sorta...looked disappointed...?

Man, take off those darn glasses so I can actually see your face.

“Well...okay...sure, we’re close. A normal amount of close,” I said, amending my previous answer.

Just a couple of normal close friends. It was starting to sound like an oxymoron. I could clarify further, but I didn’t see the point.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t see Nagafuji’s reaction to this, either...all thanks to those stupid glasses.

Chapter 4: Holiday Planning with Adachi

WHAT IS CHRISTMAS? *What is the meaning of Christmas? Does Christmas have rules? What does a “merry” Christmas look like? What is “Christmas magic”? And how much am I supposed to agonize over this?*

I decided to take a deep breath and calm down.

Two days had passed, and while I was hoping this fever would recede eventually, it had only gotten worse. Mostly I was excited to spend a major holiday with Shimamura, but also I think part of me was just overjoyed that for once in my life, something had actually gone the way I wanted it to. A tornado of emotions whirled in my chest, but I was only putting up token resistance.

Truth be told, I was enjoying the struggle...even at work.

My head was filled with snow and ornaments and lights—so much so, I even forgot to tug on the hem of my skimpy cheongsam. If I wasn’t careful, I was afraid I might just start skipping around the dining area.

And when I got home, I’d rotate my shoulder, then raise both hands to the ceiling, fingers splayed. Next, I’d ball my hands into fists, then look up at them and feel a strange sense of accomplishment. I did this several times per night. Then I’d look up at the snow falling outside my bedroom window and experience a rush of joy. Why was I so *giddy*? I was acting like a little kid.

Unfortunately, I had yet to find a cure for the worries that ailed me. The most immediate of those worries was the looming task of planning our schedule for the big day. I was the one who suggested we hang out, so it was my responsibility, but...I didn’t actually know what people usually did on Christmas. In my experience, the answer was “nothing,” but that wouldn’t fly. I needed to do some research.

Hence, I bought a magazine with the words “Christmas Date Ideas” printed on the front cover. Unfortunately, it didn’t have the kind of popularity statistics I was looking for. How was I meant to find out what the most popular date spots were? I mean, not that we were going on a date, per se.

However, the magazine *did* suggest going to see a movie, the rationale being that it was a nonthreatening location, and afterwards we'd have something in common to talk about: our opinion of said movie. Made perfectly good sense to me. My problem, however, was that I couldn't be sure if Shimamura even liked movies. She never talked about herself, so I didn't have a good sense of what she enjoyed.

Honestly, it was probably weird that I fell—er, *felt* things—toward someone I barely knew. Then again, maybe that was part of the draw. I wanted to know more about her *because* I...uh...felt things.

The magazine also suggested throwing a two-person house party for “a fun and relaxing dinner in a comfortable environment.” That sounded more in line with our interests, but...whose house would we throw it at? I didn't want Shimamura in my room, nor did I want her family invading our party. No, we needed to go into town somewhere.

This was quite possibly the most I'd ever agonized over something in my entire life. It was even more stressful than my high school entrance exams. There were a bunch of other minor worries, too, like what to wear. Should I buy a new outfit for the occasion? What would Shimamura want to see me wear?

“No zone out!”

Just then, my manager popped out of nowhere, scolding me with a funny little dance. She always seemed to have energy to spare, that one. Unlike the chef who worked in the kitchen, however, she couldn't seem to get the hang of verb conjugation, and her accent was still thick. Somehow I got the sense that her stance on the Japanese language was “as long as people can understand me, it's good enough.” Made sense to me, honestly.

The manager and the chef were a constant presence here in this “Neo-Chinese Cuisine” (I don't know either) restaurant, but on days when our ads or coupons were printed in the newspaper, some on-call employees would always show up, seemingly out of nowhere, to help handle the rush. Naturally, they were all Taiwanese. And whenever some other Taiwanese restaurant needed extra hands on deck for a grand re-opening or something, these same people would turn up there, too. Apparently all the Taiwanese immigrants knew each other or something. But while it might have made sense to pool their on-call employees, I wished these restaurants didn't all have the same duplicate menu. Here, an order of gyoza did *not* look like the picture. Their shape

was different, and it didn't come with that many.

There were no customers, so my manager kept on dancing. Then it occurred to me to ask: "Is it cool if I take Christmas Day off? You know, the 25th?"

Normally this woman always looked like she was half-asleep, but not this time. Her eyes sparkled. "You going on date?"

"Not...entirely..."

That was a weird way to put it—was I trying to suggest it was *partially* a date, or what? Then again, if the point of a "date" was to have fun and get to know someone you were interested in, then maybe in that sense it *was* kind of a date.

Me and Shimamura, going on a date. The thought was enough to boil my brain. And if I was this nervous at the mere concept, then maybe it was time to admit that I *did* in fact see our hangout as a date.

But the more I focused on it, the more humiliated I felt...until eventually I started to wish I'd never invited her.

The next day, I spaced out in class until the lunch bell rang. Next thing I knew, I was walking aimlessly down the hallway. Confused and alarmed, I turned and looked back the way I'd come. Had I subconsciously followed after Shimamura like a homesick little Swiss girl yearning for the mountains? If so, I certainly didn't see her anywhere. *Oh god, what if she saw me stagger out of the classroom like a zombie?*

Then I wondered: What floor was I on? I glanced out the window and determined from the view that I had to be on the second floor. That left one last question: *Do I go to the cafeteria or return to the classroom?*

It felt like I'd just caught myself sleepwalking. This was mildly concerning, considering the school building had a lot of staircases where I could fall down and break my neck. *From now on I should try to restrict all zoning out to the first floor... Guess that's easier said than done.*

As I was debating whether to advance or retreat, a familiar face walked past me. She noticed me looking at her and turned back, her

long-ish hair swaying with her movements. It was Hino.

“Sup, Ada-cheechee! Whatcha standing around for? Feeling lightheaded or something?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Oh, are you waiting for Shimamura?”

Sadly, no, that’s not it either. “Not particularly,” I muttered under my breath.

Just then, it occurred to me that Hino’s other half was nowhere to be seen. I’d expected her to turn up by now.

“It’s not often I see *you* flying solo, either. Where’s, uh, Nagafuji?”

“Say wha...?!”

Hino glanced around sharply. *Did she not notice until just now?*

“You’re right... She’s not here! Normally she hardly ever loses track of me!”

What are you, her guidepost? I imagined Nagafuji wandering away into the sunset. It didn’t feel right. Then I imagined her wandering away into a candy store. *Okay, now I see it.*

“Well, I’m sure she’ll turn up at the cafeteria eventually. I’d better grab us a table.”

She seemed confident in Nagafuji’s homing instinct, but I wasn’t so sure. Right as Hino was about to walk off, however, she suddenly stopped short and beckoned to me.

“Wanna come have lunch with us, Adatsy?”

“Who, me?”

“You see any other Adachi-san standing around here? Anyways, I just figured you were already headed there.”

She flashed her pearly whites at me. With her short stature and frank, unreserved personality, she felt more like a little sister than a peer...but I knew she’d probably get mad at me if I said that out loud, so I didn’t.

“Okay then, I’ll tag along.”

Seeing as she might have the answers to my questions, I decided to accompany her. Was this our first time hanging out together without Shimamura? Come to think of it, yes, it absolutely was. In fact, it was

my first time hanging out at school with someone who *wasn't* Shimamura. Why? Because I never felt the desire to be around anyone. As for the reason behind *that*, well...I decided not to dig up the past. I didn't have room in my brain for more worries. Right now the right half was dedicated to Shimamura and the left half was reserved for Christmas. Fancy, I know.

"That reminds me... I feel like Shimamura or someone told me you get good grades in English. Is that true?"

Who else would talk about me if not Shimamura? On second thought...why would Shimamura talk about my grades at all? That was the more pressing question.

"I wouldn't say *good*, per se. Just, you know, not bad. Average," I replied modestly.

"Interesting," she mused, almost like she was impressed for some unfathomable reason. This was followed by a cheery "Hello!" in English. *Should've seen this coming.*

"Uh... Hello," I parroted back, smiling slightly. I was 100 percent sure she'd just blurted out the first English word that came to mind. She was like a little kid...in a good way, I mean. And not because of her height.

Silence fell between us.

Strangely enough, whenever Shimamura wasn't around, I suddenly didn't mind Hino and Nagafuji as much. Nothing against Shimamura, of course—not like she was a hindrance or something. Actually, no, maybe I had it backwards. Whenever they were around, I felt like there was a wall between myself and Shimamura. *They* were the hindrance.

I knew they weren't bad people, and I liked them just fine...but I wasn't capable of caring for them the same way I cared for Shimamura. What made Shimamura so special? I didn't know. But even if the answer was just "because I liked her more," I still couldn't quite explain *why* I liked her more. Love didn't always come with rational explanations attached.

Together, Hino and I navigated around the staff room to the cafeteria entrance. The winter wind blew between the buildings, turning each covered walkway into an arctic zone. A line had formed at the meal ticket machine out front, and everyone was shivering in the

cold. You'd think the school would get a lot of complaints about this particular placement, and yet they never showed any signs of relocating it.

The two of us joined the end of the line and huddled together for warmth. As we waited, I took out my cell phone and checked it. Usually this was something I did more out of boredom than anything else, but this time I had a good reason: to check for any emails from Shimamura. After all, it was possible she could change her mind about hanging out at any given time. Fortunately, my inbox was empty. I heaved a sigh of relief.

Nothing in life was guaranteed. Sometimes things just didn't work out. So all I could do was pray that it would all go according to plan. Was there anything I could use as a bargaining chip? I hardly ever interacted with people, so I never got the opportunity to help anyone. *Maybe I should go out of my way to do at least one good deed so Santa will put me on the "nice" list.*

Eventually I made it to the front of the line. I wanted something to warm me up, so I bought a ramen meal ticket.

"I think I'll get the same thing," Hino commented to herself, and sure enough, she bought one, too.

The cafeteria ramen was decorated with a garnish of bright pink naruto swirls, something I didn't see too often at restaurants anymore.

"Got any hobbies, Ada-chee?" Hino asked as we stood in a second line inside at the counter to redeem our meal tickets.

"Not really." This was the same answer I'd given Shimamura when she asked me, and it was still every bit as boring as it was back then. But it was the honest truth, so she'd just have to accept it. No sense in making something up to try to look cool. Nor could I tell her my hobby was Shimamura.

"Oh, same as Shimamura, then."

My heart skipped a beat as Hino mentioned the very person I was thinking of. Then the words sank in, and I heaved an internal sigh of relief. No, she hadn't read my mind. Slowly, I ruminated on her statement. *Same as Shimamura...*

"Oh ho, what's with the smirk? Reminiscing or something?" Hino asked, peering at me. Then I realized my glee must've shown on my

face and started to panic.

“Uh...nothing!” I waved a hand dismissively.

If Shimamura had seen me grinning to myself just now, she’d probably think I was a weirdo. Then again, at least that would prove I wasn’t a “blank slate” like my mom always claimed.

Once we got our ramen, we sat down across from each other at the end of a nearby table. The cafeteria was packed, so there were hardly any open seats. Hino placed a handkerchief on the empty seat next to her—saving it for Nagafuji, if I had to guess. *What if Shimamura shows up?* I glanced beside me, but the seat was already taken.

Then Hino pressed her palms together to say grace, so I followed suit. Once we were done, I watched as she picked up her chopsticks and lifted a bite of noodles out of her bowl. Now that I was paying attention, I realized she was actually very elegant in her motions. This came as a surprise, considering she had such a carefree personality. Maybe her parents were strict with her or something.

“Hey, so...”

“Mmm?”

Chewing a mouthful of bean sprouts, Hino looked up, the tip of her nose wet with broth. I paused for a beat, then asked her the question that was on my mind. “Do you know what kind of stuff Shimamura likes?”

Can’t have Christmas without presents, after all. It was the first thing I thought of when I heard the word. Even if Shimamura didn’t get *me* anything, I still wanted to get something for her. The desire was ingrained in me.

“I dunno... I’m not sure she likes *anything*,” Hino replied pensively.

Point taken. We both returned to our ramen.

After another bite of bean sprouts, Hino washed it down with a sip of water, then folded her arms in contemplation, her chopsticks still in hand. “She’s not really the type to talk about herself, y’know?”

“Yeah, I know.” *I’d ask her directly, but it’d be weird, and she probably wouldn’t tell me. That’s why I’m asking you.* “Have you ever gone shopping with her or anything?”

“Well, sure, a few times. We’ve gone to the bookstore, and... Oh, that’s right. We checked out the tea shop once.”

“The tea shop?”

“Yeah. I was running an errand, and Shimamura tagged along... Oh yeah, and I think she said one of the tea blends smelled really good. Was it black tea or green tea...?”

“Interesting. So she likes tea?”

Maybe that would make for a nice holiday gift—something practical instead of sentimental. That way Shimamura wouldn’t feel awkward accepting it. But most of all, I wanted it to be something she would actually like.

“Can you remember the name of the blend or anything?” I pressed.

Hino set her chopsticks down, then re-folded her arms. “Gimme a minute here... Ugh, what was it? It *definitely* wasn’t barley tea... What shelf was it on? Dang it, I can’t remember... I feel like the name’s right on the tip of my tongue. Maybe I’d remember if I saw it.”

“Then...would you wanna...go with me to find it?”

I didn’t even know where to start looking, so she was my only hope if I wanted to track it down. Normally I’d never ask this of her, since I didn’t really like spending time with anyone who wasn’t Shimamura, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

“Hmmm.” Hino glanced around for a bit. “Shouldn’t you go with Shimamura and have *her* pick it out for you?”

I fell silent. Admittedly it was the logical conclusion, but now was not the time to be asking Shimamura on yet another not-date. Besides, the second I asked her, it would become painfully obvious what I was trying to do, and the thought was humiliating.

“Oh, I get it,” Hino nodded, as if she’d intuited something. “In that case, sure, I’ll go with you.”

Exactly how she’d chosen to interpret my silence, I wasn’t sure, but either way, she must have worked out that I wanted to keep it a secret from Shimamura.

“Okay. Thanks.”

“How about today after school? The tea shop’s over at the mall.”

“Oh, um...sure.”

In a town as rural as this one, hangout spots were naturally limited. In our case, our options were either the mall or the station square. On Christmas, I had a feeling Shimamura and I would probably end up at the mall. It was the classiest place this backwater town had to offer.

Still, the thought of going into town with Hino made me nervous, albeit not in the same way that being with Shimamura did.

“Is her birthday coming up or something?”

“Huh? Oh, uh...I dunno. I don’t think so.” She’d already turned sixteen, so if anything, *my* birthday was probably closer.

“Oh...so it’s not a birthday gift?” Hino blinked in surprise.

I could see the gears turning in her head and figured she’d probably put two and two together any second now, so I did my best to play it cool. “Oh, you know, it’s that time of year! Yep!” I nodded vigorously, as if this made all the sense in the world. I *really* didn’t want her asking any follow-up questions.

Then Nagafuji showed up. Honestly, her timing couldn’t have been better.

“Ah! I found Hino!”

“Oh, hey!” Hino looked up with a grin, her nose still brothy.

Nagafuji was carrying a sandwich from the school store. *Why would she buy food there, then bring it all the way here? Oh, right. Because Hino’s here.* Truth be told, I envied the way these two always seemed to instinctively seek each other out, even without any direct verbal communication.

“Well, well, well. Look who it is! You’re *late*, my dear Nagafuji-chan! Where did you wander off to?”

“Mmmm...” Ignoring Hino’s question, Nagafuji sat down next to her at the table, then placed a hand on Hino’s head and patted her soft hair.

“The hell, man?!” Hino snapped in an affected voice like she was referencing a movie or something.

“You’re bigger now.”

“Excuse me?!”

“Well, I figured the reason I lost sight of you is because you got smaller somehow.”

Evidently she *did* in fact get lost. Rolling her eyes, Hino smacked Nagafuji over the head, producing a pleasant airy sound. Then the two of them turned to their food like nothing had ever happened.

They're so close... I don't think I could ever smack Shimamura like that.

“Sorry I’m late, Adatsy!” Hino called as she stood waiting for me by the school gates. I really wasn’t sure how to react to that. If anything, *I* was late. Obviously I knew she was just joking around, but I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to joke back. She froze with her hand aloft in a wave, waiting endlessly for me to finally respond.

“Sorry, I was just grabbing my bike, so, uh...no, you’re not late... Sorry.”

“Hmmm. You’re another Shimamura—you don’t know how to play along.”

While part of me enjoyed being likened to Shimamura, another part of me wasn’t so sure. If Shimamura was anything like me, then I probably wouldn’t have fallen in lo—in *like* with her.

“But I’ll give you some pity points, since you at least tried to think of something.”

“...Thanks.” I couldn’t tell if she was sincerely complimenting me or just trying to cheer me up after I put my foot in my mouth, but either way, I accepted it on reflex. *Gah*. “Where’s Nagafuji?”

“Look, pal, I’m not her mom, okay? We’re not conjoined at the hip or anything,” she scoffed.

I mean, if anything she’d be your mom—you know, since she’s taller. But I didn’t say this out loud. *Oh, or they could be sisters...but even then, Nagafuji would still be the older sister.* I didn’t say that, either.

“She said she’s busy. These things happen, y’know, once every year or so.”

She’s only ever busy once a year? You’re joking. Actually, Hino was

probably joking. But in the event she wasn't, that would make Nagafuji even more of an enigma than Shimamura.

"All right, let's go!"

With her hands in the air, Hino began to skip down the street. It was impressive how much energy she had to spare, considering it was just another cloudy winter day.

"You don't want a ride?"

"Oh, no, I totally do. But not until we're a little ways from campus. That way the teachers can't yell at us."

Shimamura had always jokingly referred to Hino and Nagafuji as goody-goodies, but now it made sense. Unlike them, Shimamura was content to hop on at the bike parking area. *I thought life as a delinquent was supposed to be harder, not easier.*

"What's up?"

I looked up to find Hino looking over her shoulder at me. "Oh, I was just thinking... You're a model student, huh?"

"Yeah, I know. I'm pretty great, aren't I?" she joked smugly. Once we rounded the corner, she jumped onto the back of my bike and put her hands on my shoulders.

That was how I realized hers were smaller than Shimamura's.

Fitting of a weekday afternoon, the mall parking lot was packed full of cars and bicycles alike. So much so, in fact, that I had trouble finding a place to park mine. If I rested it too heavily against another bike, I ran the risk of courting a domino-effect catastrophe whenever I or someone else needed to pull a bike out. I'd experienced this numerous times at school firsthand.

We walked in through the first-floor entrance, next to the pet shop. I didn't have the first clue where we were going, so I let Hino take the lead. Currently she was on the phone with someone.

"Yeah. I'm in the area, so I figured I'd ask... Okay, sure. How many? Five? Got it."

Based on her responses, I suspected she was probably talking to a family member. I took out my cell phone, too. Partly so I could pretend to have a social life, but mostly to check my inbox for any emails. *Nope. Good.* Shimamura hardly ever emailed me in the first place, and the last time she did, it was to ask me about sit-ups. *What was that about, anyway?* I still didn't understand.

We passed by a confectionery kiosk, then a wine kiosk. Finally the tea shop came into view, situated across from the bakery in the corner of the intersection. The words "tea shop" brought to mind the color green, but the store interior was actually mostly brown—shelves upon shelves of loose-leaf tea blends packed into little brown bags. Outside, the sign read *Mikuniya Zangoro*, almost like it was someone's name.

"Free samples!"

When we entered, an employee standing to the side of the entrance held out a tray lined with little paper cups the size of my pinky. Reflexively, I took one. Inside was about one mouthful's worth of tea, so I downed the whole thing...and instantly regretted it. My tongue was still chilly from biking here, and the hot liquid was a nasty surprise it wasn't expecting. My eyes bulged in my skull.

Once I overcame the burning sensation, my brain set about processing the flavor. "Bitter," I remarked aloud without an ounce of tact.

The employee took my empty cup with a forced smile, then looked over at Hino. "Great to see you again."

"Yep, it's me!" she replied, waving casually. Unlike me, she wasn't prompted to try a free sample. Instead, she stared poring through the shelves like she'd done it a dozen times before.

"Do you come here a lot?" I asked.

"Eh...often enough, I guess. My family drinks a lot of tea, you could say," Hino replied vaguely.

Tea was generally not something I would go out of my way to purchase at a specialty store, so I couldn't help but wonder if her family was a bunch of stuffy rich people—or was I just uncultured? She grabbed a basket and filled it with five bags of the same ginger tea. Apparently this was what they'd asked her to pick up over the phone.

"I bet a cup of that would warm you right up," I commented as I

watched her. Personally, I would've preferred to stand there in silence, but I felt obligated to make at least a token attempt at small talk.

Hino picked up one of the bags and stroked the label. "It helps combat cold sensitivity...according to my family, anyway."

"You don't drink it?"

"Nah. I don't have cold sensitivity problems." She returned the bag to her basket. "Now where was it...?"

She stared up at a shelf of black tea blends near the register, then glanced over at the shelf of Chinese tea blends next to it. Under each shelf, the corresponding blends were packed into little tins, enabling customers to smell the tea leaves prior to purchase. I didn't know the first thing about tea varieties, so every now and then I just grabbed a tin at random and sniffed it. Some smelled minty while others smelled astringent. But since I wasn't a tea connoisseur, I had no way of discerning good from bad.

Meanwhile, Hino sniffed each tin in turn. *Is she going to recognize it by smell?* I decided to sit back and let her do her thing, so I turned and looked out at the mall's main walkway.

I could see a little lounge area with benches situated around a giant decorative tree all wrapped up with Christmas lights. Each bulb flashed different colors: red, blue, and yellow, in sequence. It didn't stand out much here in broad daylight, but once the sun went down I was sure it would turn heads. Its branches were covered with all sorts of glittery ornaments, like apples and stars. I vaguely remembered seeing something similar in a picture book when I was little.

Christmas was on its way, and the whole town seemed abuzz with energy, people milling to and fro. I turned back to the store, then quietly hung my head.

Deep down, I knew it wasn't normal for two girls to hang out on Christmas. Nor was it normal for me to get excited about the prospect. *Shimamura* certainly wasn't excited for Christmas. To her, it was probably just another mundane event on the calendar.

There was a stark difference between my enthusiasm level and hers. The question was, did I want her to notice that? If I didn't, then I probably wouldn't act like this, so I guess maybe I did. But what if that realization pushed her further away from me? The thought terrified me.

This was the experience of having a crush in a nutshell.

“I’ve got a question for you, Adatsy-kun.”

Hastily, I looked up. Hino was glancing over her shoulder at me as she reached for a bag of tea on the shelf.

“What’s up?” I prompted.

“Will you get mad at me if I tell you this is it and then it turns out to...not be it?”

“No? I wouldn’t hold that against you.”

“Okay, cool, because this is *probably* it.”

She grabbed the bag and handed it to me. Evidently she’d tracked it down a lot more easily than I was expecting her to. The label read *Legend of Africa*. Not really the first thing I’d think of when I thought of Shimamura, but okay. *Is this black tea? From Africa? Does Africa even have tea? I guess they do.*

“Wanna pay for these together?” Hino asked, indicating her basket. I nodded and set the African tea with her other bags.

Once we finished paying for our stuff, Hino pointed at a coffee shop right nearby. The store was mostly devoid of customers, and the sign out front advertising soft-serve ice cream was largely ignored by the passersby.

“Wanna get a drink and hang out?”

“Sure...maybe just for a bit.”

I wanted to repay her for tagging along with me, so we walked a handful of steps over to the empty coffee shop.

“I’ll buy,” I declared, taking a step forward and raising my wallet aloft in the air.

Her eyes widened. “How come?”

“To thank you...for...coming with me.”

“Aha! Now I get why Shimamura likes you!”

It was a rather straightforward compliment, and one that I was happy to accept.

Once our coffee was ready, we chose a place to sit...and that was when I noticed the chairs. They reminded me of the sort of thing you’d see in a junior high school shop class—crude, unpolished, and almost

entirely made of wood. Were they someone's hand-me-downs? They smelled like sawdust.

I leaned back against the backrest and it creaked like it was barely attached.

"It's kinda cold in here, huh? My legs are freezing!" Hino exclaimed, scuffing her shoes against the floor as she cupped her fingers around her coffee.

Indeed, the warmth from the in-store heater didn't seem to reach our bare legs, where the chill of winter had seemingly taken up permanent residence. Perhaps the biggest threat to this store's success was lurking right there under the tables.

I'd already been burned once—literally—so I took my time with my drink, blowing on it between small sips. But even if I were the kind of person who could chug hot beverages like a fish in water, I imagine I still would've paused to blow on it. That way I'd have an excuse for my silence.

Just then, Hino pointed at me. "I bet you feel awkward 'cause there's nothing to talk about, huh?"

It felt like she had read my mind. At first I was impressed, but then I realized it must have been obvious. I responded with a stiff smile, to which she smiled back. But hers was genuine and innocent, and perhaps that, more so than anything else, spoke to her true character as a human being.

"Honestly, it's like this with Nagafuji, too. But with her, it's actually *more* awkward when she ta—"

She froze, her mouth hanging open, and *sloooooo*ly tilted her head to the right, peering over me at the main walkway outside the store. Following her line of sight, I looked over my shoulder—and my eyes opened so wide, they nearly shot out of my head.

Shimamura and Nagafuji were walking side by side, Shimamura affectionately resting her hand on Nagafuji's shoulder.

Reflexively, Hino and I exchanged a glance.

"Oh ho... So *that's* why she was 'busy,' eh...?"

She nodded stiffly to herself, then put her chin in her hands and looked at me. Somehow I could sense compassion from her gaze. As for Shimamura and Nagafuji, they kept right on walking without ever

noticing us; I watched them until they disappeared from sight. My eyes hurt, probably because I'd forgotten to blink. Even my eyelids felt numb.

"Did she tell you they were going to hang out?"

By "she," Hino probably meant Shimamura. Silently, I shook my head.

Truth be told, this was actually really upsetting to me...but why? Wasn't Shimamura allowed to go shopping with a friend? Of course she was. But...something about it knocked the Christmas spirit right out of me, and the hole it left behind was palpable, like a missing block in a game of Jenga. Gone was my sense of security; now all that remained was anxiety and panic. My eyes felt dry. Yeah...I was definitely forgetting to blink.

"Oh, good grief," Hino muttered. She leaned forward and patted me on the shoulder. "What am I gonna do with you, kid?"

"...Huh? What do you mean?" I stared at her, confused. She jostled me so hard, I was seeing stars.

"Wanna tail them?" Hino suggested, half-joking, but also half-serious.

Without thinking, I opened my mouth wide—but no words came. My lips opened and closed like a goldfish out of water. Then, finally, my brain caught up to me. The little girl inside me was telling me to go... which meant it was almost certainly the wrong thing to do.

"Nah, let's not. They're...you know...*busy* or whatever."

I could hear the sarcasm in my voice. Silently, I cursed myself. Shimamura was allowed to hang out with other people—if anything, the time she spent with me was the exception rather than the rule—so why did it gnaw at me like this? Right now, what I wanted more than anything was not to tail them, but to run right up to them and join them.

Hino seemed to be handling it better than I was, but deep down, perhaps she felt the same way—like someone had just shone a spotlight onto our inferiority.

"Oh, Adatsy, you're such a good kid," she teased, smiling slightly.

I had yet to really thank her for all her help today, but now, in more than one sense, it felt like I'd let a priceless opportunity slip by.

After that incident, we downed our drinks as fast as possible, then awkwardly headed out of the mall.

Did Hino walk with me back to the bike parking area?

Honestly, I don't remember.

I sat with one finger hovered over my phone screen, wavering back and forth.

"Why were you with Nagafuji just now?"

No, that sounded too aggressive. Particularly the "why" part. The more directly I asked, the angrier I sounded.

Given the slightest introspection, it would appear that I was jealous.

Shimamura was just innocently having a fun time with her friend, but here I was, acting like I'd been *betrayed* or something. She hadn't done anything to warrant this sort of interrogation. I was hurt over nothing. I knew that. But I was hurt nonetheless.

I was dying to ask her about it, but I couldn't decide whether I had the right to ask. Was it really any of my business?

From her perspective, I'd essentially done the same thing—hung out with Hino without her permission. Well, maybe that's a weird way of putting it. Behind her back, I guess. But even if she found out about it, she probably wouldn't care. I could picture myself telling her, only for her to reply "whoa, that's weird"—end of conversation. And if that's how *she* would look at it, then I needed to look at it that way, too...or did I?

What am I to Shimamura, anyway?



This question helped to bridle my rampant emotions, successfully preventing me from lashing out in the heat of the moment. Instead, I flung my phone down and collapsed onto my bed. My hair was still wet from the bath I took earlier, but I didn't feel like getting up.

I reached out and grabbed two things: my pillow and the little brown bag of African tea. The employee at the counter had kindly gift-wrapped it for me—I guess Hino requested it or something. I gazed at it blankly until the restlessness in my chest melted away in a mass of white-hot yearning.

I was just a friend to her. Nothing more, nothing less. I needed to remember that.

At some point I'd deluded myself into thinking I was the only person in her life, but this simply wasn't the case, and I had no right to get upset that I was wrong about it. No matter how intense my feelings got, they would only ever be one-sided.

"I regret everything."

These embers had burned in my chest all day long. Bit by bit, I crushed them between my molars until my mouth was full of bitter, pulpy ash. I hated the taste, but I knew I wasn't going to be able to sleep until the work was done.

Once I swallowed the last of the filth, it was time to wipe the slate clean and start over.

Regardless of what sort of relationship I wanted with Shimamura, the fact remained that she and I were just regular friends. With this knowledge in mind, I wanted our bond to grow stronger. To that end, all I could really do was take it one day at a time. One holiday at a time.

But there was one thing I needed to keep firmly in mind: The closer we got, the more easily she'd feel my heat. And I couldn't let her plunge her hand into that fire—I needed to control the intensity, lest she get burned.

So what did I want her to feel from me on Christmas Day? Love? Romance? No, no, no! Why did I always come back to that?

The correct answer, of course, was *affection*.

My heart was filled with this red-hot magma. Would there ever come a day that she'd appreciate its warmth?

“Shimamura...”

I murmured her name, and my chest burned hot enough to tide me over until this long, cold winter came to an end.

Interlude: Yashiro Comes Calling Part 2

O*NCE I GET HOME, I'll do my spelling homework, I think to myself as I walk home from school. Then I'll practice playing my recorder, and after that—*

Just then, I hear a “beep beep beep” and glance over my shoulder.
“Whoa!”

It's Yachi. This is my second time running into her on my way home, and once again, I'm completely caught off-guard. This street runs from the community center to the special education school, and there are pear orchards all around us. But a lot of other kids take this street, and they stare at Yachi whenever she's around. It's embarrassing.

Now that it's winter, she's wearing a scarf in place of her usual hat. For some reason, the scarf seems heavier than she is. Maybe it's because she's so sparkly and floaty. Her butterfly hairstyle is floaty, too. It's kinda weird.

“You're Little Shimamura, correct?”

“Um...yeah...?” *And what do you mean, little?*

“That's too much of a mouthful. I'm just going to call you Little.”

“That's not even my name!” Oh well. At least it's a fun change. Everybody at school only ever calls me Shima-chan. “Are you on your way home from school, Yachi?” I ask. Then I notice that she's not carrying anything—not even a pack of croquettes like last time.

“I do not attend school. I already graduated many years ago.”

“Lucky!”

“I know, right?” She puffs out her chest proudly, not that she has much of one. I know some grown-ups can be really petite, but still...it kinda feels like she's lying.

I lean up against the fence outside the special education school. Yachi stands next to me and does the same. But unlike the chipped blue paint on the fence, Yachi's sparkles are bright and shiny. Farm-fresh, as

they say.

For some reason the two of us are friends now, even though she totally chased me around when we first met... Oh well. She *did* give me that croquette, I guess.

“I have a question.”

“What is it?” she asks politely, though her diction could use some work.

“Are you really an alien?”

She clucks her tongue and wags her index finger in my face. “Of course I am. I’ve never told a lie in my life.”

Grrrr. Are you saying my sister’s a liar, then?

“Prove it. Prove to me that you’re an alien!” I cup my hands together and hold them out like she’s going to pour water into them or something.

She smirks and wags her finger again. “To do so would violate our code of ethics, and so I must decline.”

“Aww, c’mon!”

“Intergalactic policy is very strict.”

“Grrrr...fine then. Rules are rules, I guess.”

I feel like she’s just making excuses. Maybe she *is* lying. But then again, she’s bright blue...

“Oh? What’s that?”

Yachi grabs the recorder case poking out from inside my backpack and yanks hard. The backpack straps dig into my shoulders. Meanwhile, her hair sparkles fly everywhere with the movement. *Whoa.*

“Don’t you know what a recorder is?”

“A...recorder...?”

If she doesn’t know what a recorder is, then there’s no way she graduated from elementary school. She takes the recorder out of its case and taps on it with her fingers.

“It’s a musical instrument. You hold it like this, and put your mouth there, and then you blow,” I explain without thinking, because explaining stuff makes me feel cool.

“Oh, I see.” Yachi dutifully follows my instructions.

I don’t normally let other people play my recorder, but with her, I don’t mind. Is it because she seems so...*pure*? She has this faint chill about her—not like winter wind, but more like a fresh mountain spring. Like an ice sculpture, except she’s warm and alive.

She puts her mouth on the mouthpiece and goes
FWEEEEEEoooEEEEoooEEEE—

“Aaaagh!” It’s so loud and shrill, I cover my ears. *You don’t have to blow it that hard!*

“Oooh...oh...” Yachi seems a bit dizzy herself, and I can’t help but giggle.

She has this confident, can-do attitude about her, but when it comes down to it, she struggles with stuff like any normal girl. Huh...I guess that means she *is* a normal girl. Somehow I feel like I can relate to her more.

“What an intense form of music.”

“Only because *you* blew it too hard!”

I guess she really doesn’t know what a recorder is. But why not? I’m so curious about her life now.

“You have to blow out more slowly than that.”

“Oh, it’s nearly time for bargain hour. I’d better be going.”

Yachi pushes herself off the fence and hands me my recorder back. “Bargain hour”? Like, at the grocery store? Or the butcher’s shop, maybe? Here I thought I would get to teach her how to play the recorder. Now I’m a little disappointed.

Wait... How does she know what time it is when she didn’t even look at a watch or anything?

She turns back and waves at me with a smile. But right before I can yell goodbye—

“× ▲△★Ǻ 々θ!”

“Whuh?” I freeze, stunned, my eyes wide. What the heck was that sound?!

“Whoops. Force of habit. Goodbye!”

Still waving, she dances down the street, zig-zagging along until

she's out of sight.

"Hey! HEY!" I shout after her, but she's too fast for me, so I give up. "Nnngh."

Personally, I'm more curious what that sound was. I've never heard any words like that before... On second thought, I'm not sure they were words at all. It didn't sound like they came out of her mouth, but instead transmitted directly to my ears somehow.

Was it English? French? Or...could it be...

"Alienese?"

As I tilt my head in confusion, Yachi's trail of sparkles float into my nose and eyes. I wipe them away with my fingers, then blow them off into the air, where they rise up and slowly disappear. Is she really an alien, or is she just playing pretend? Either way, there was something fishy about her.

And by "something," I mean a lot of things.

Chapter 5: Holiday Planning with Shimamura

AS SOON AS THE lunch bell rang, Adachi got up from her desk and staggered out of the classroom, leaving her textbooks and everything behind. I watched her go, wondering idly if she was feeling okay. Judging from her meandering gait, it didn't seem like she had a particular destination in mind. Did it have something to do with our Christmas plans? Probably. Hence, I decided not to go after her.

Adachi had been acting this way ever since she showed up at my house to ask me to hang out on Christmas. It seemed like her mind was busy elsewhere, and her gross motor skills suffered as a result.

Sometimes, in the middle of class, I'd catch her grinning to herself...and from an outsider's perspective, it was really, *really* weird. What happened to the icy, aloof Adachi I once knew? Did she migrate south for the winter? Then again, I guess "icy and aloof" was just my mental image of her, not the real her. Considering everyone liked to joke that I got all my clothes from Shimamura Co., I knew what it felt like to have other people jump to conclusions about who you were.

When Adachi didn't return to the classroom right away, I figured she must've gone to the school store or the cafeteria or something. As I pondered my own lunch plans, I suddenly noticed Nagafuji standing all by herself—a rare sight. Normally Hino was always right there with her...or was *she* with *Hino*? Whatever.

Nagafuji slid her glasses back on and started walking my way. *Man, she's tall. I'm kinda jealous.*

"Have you seen Hino?"

"If *you* don't know where she is, then no one does."

"Good point," Nagafuji nodded solemnly.

I was mostly joking, but yeah. Compared to Nagafuji, the amount of time I'd spent getting to know Hino was fairly minimal.

"One minute I was cleaning my glasses, and the next minute Hino was just *gone*," Nagafuji explained.

She always spoke so vaguely, it was hard to know if she was ever

actually telling the truth, and you'd lose brain cells trying to figure it out. Honestly, I was impressed Hino could tolerate her as much as she did. *I guess friendship's more important than minor annoyances.*

"Did you guys bring your lunch from home today?" I asked.

"Nope. We're gonna eat in the cafeteria."

"Well then, that's probably where she is."

"Oh!" Nagafuji clapped like I'd done a magic trick.

Frankly, there were only so many places Hino could have gone during lunch, and if she'd stopped to think about it for two seconds, surely she could have figured this out on her own. Was her brain really that empty? If so, then why even bother wearing glasses in the first place?

In actuality, however, Nagafuji always aced all her tests. Not sure how, but yeah.

"Are you coming, too?"

"Nah, I think I'll grab lunch from the school store this time. But I'll walk with you partway, at least."

I dug my wallet out of my bookbag and followed Nagafuji out of the classroom. It felt weird with just the two of us walking around.

With her considerable height, my eyes were naturally drawn to her. But while I inevitably had to tilt my head up to look at her, she hardly ever moved her head at all. Her gaze didn't shift much, either—she just stared straight ahead. With tunnel vision like that, I was starting to think she might get hit by a car one of these days. Then again, she was probably safe with Hino around to look out for her.

Come to think of it, what club is she in again? Somehow I couldn't really picture her having a functional conversation with anyone who wasn't Hino. Even *I* couldn't understand her half the time.

Oh, I know. I should ask Nagafuji about it. Unlike Hino, she might actually give me a direct answer.

"Do you do anything for Christmas?" I didn't want to dump *all* the planning in Adachi's lap, so I figured I should give it some thought myself, and I was hoping Nagafuji could offer me a useful suggestion.

She looked at me. "We usually have chicken curry."

That was not the sort of answer I was hoping for.

“Curry, huh? Interesting.” *Maybe Adachi and I could go to a curry restaurant...or make our own homemade curry together... No, that doesn't seem quite right.* “Is that it? You don't go anywhere with Hino, or...? Actually, you know what, never mind. Don't worry about it,” I said, backtracking quickly.

Part of me just wanted someone to tell me that hanging out with a girl on Christmas was a normal, common thing.

Nagafuji blinked. “Hino? What about her?”

“It's nothing.”

“You sure? Hmmm... Hino... Christmas... Hino... Christmas...” She ignored me and started to ponder something, tilting her head from side to side. “I feel like Hino's just...always at my house.”

“Oh...uh...interesting.”

Then she straightened up suddenly. “We used to give each other Christmas presents when we were little, now that you mention it.”

“Presents? That's cool.”

In fact, it sounded like a pretty good idea...but I didn't feel like having a whole conversation with Adachi to plan out our gifts. Instead, I'd just give her a gift without expecting anything in return. My hope was that it would give us something to talk about.

But what would she want for Christmas? What sort of things did she like? The obvious option would be to ask her outright, but...that would be kind of lame. Besides, what if she asked for some expensive name-brand shoes or something? I knew she wasn't really the type, but still.

We walked down the stairs, and at the end of the hall, we arrived at the school store—a little shop on the corner of the building run by a single middle-aged lady. Inside, the dim lighting made the white walls glow faintly yellow, neatly matching the baskets of sandwiches and buns for sale.

Compared to the cafeteria, the line here was pretty short. Once the people ahead of us had paid for their items, we were free to take our time browsing the selection.

“Whoa...I didn't know they sold this stuff here,” Nagafuji murmured, pushing her glasses up her nose and leaning in to read the price list.

“You’ve never bought anything from here?”

“No, I don’t think so. Normally I either bring my own lunch or eat in the cafeteria.”

“Gotcha.”

Personally, I was a regular here. Whenever I wanted to cut class in the gym loft, I’d always come here to grab lunch. As a result, the shop lady recognized me. She greeted me with a smile; I inclined my head politely. Now all I needed to do was pick a sweet roll at random and give her the money...

Wait...

“Nagafuji, I’m not trying to stop you or anything, but...”

“Hmm?”

“Why are you buying stuff?” I asked as the shop lady handed Nagafuji a plastic to-go bag containing a carton of milk, an egg sandwich, and a red bean bun.

At this, she seemed to remember her original plan to eat at the cafeteria. Her gaze lowered to the bag. “Oh. Right.” The bag swayed with her movements.

“And for that matter, why did you walk all this way with me?”

“Well, you should’ve said something sooner.”

No, you need to use your brain. Assuming you actually have one.

“I gotta go!” she shouted, and off she went in the direction of the cafeteria. I called after her.

“Hey! If you’re free after school, would you wanna come shopping with me?”

I figured I may as well invite her...uh...because she was already here, I guess. She nodded without a shred of hesitation.

“Sure. Whatcha buying? More food?”

Not everything is about food, you know. Not that I was against buying something edible for Adachi’s gift, but I didn’t really know what she liked to eat.

“I want to buy a Christmas present, but I don’t know what to get.”

Since Nagafuji had exchanged gifts at least once in her lifetime, she was already miles ahead of me. Maybe she would know where to

look. Plus, she seemed like the type to wing it and pick something without overthinking it, and that was fine by me. Otherwise, if I had to choose it myself, I wasn't confident I would make up my mind in time.

"A Christmas present? For who? Wait... For me?!" she asked gleefully.

"No. It's for...my sister," I lied reflexively. I didn't want her getting any weird ideas about me and Adachi.

"Hmm?" Nagafuji tilted her head, puzzled. "You have a sister?"

"Yeah, a little sister." *Plus another one that's taller than me.* But I wasn't going to say that out loud.

"Hino's pretty small too," Nagafuji nodded proudly.

"Uhhh...yeah... Yeah, she is." *What does that have to do with anything?*

"Okay, well, see you after school!"

And with that, Nagafuji headed off to the cafeteria while I returned to the classroom, all the while thinking about how I'd inadvertently referred to Adachi as my sister. *That's...probably weird, isn't it?*

"Then again..."

She did call me "onee-chan" once in the past, so...maybe she's just my bigger little sister.

Yeah...that's all it is.

Looking back, this was quite possibly the first time I'd ever hung out with Nagafuji without Hino there. Occasionally I went fishing with Hino over the weekend, but Nagafuji was always busy with club activities or helping out at the butcher's shop. Unlike us, she actually seemed to have a life.

"You almost forgot about our plans, didn't you?" I asked.

"That's what happens when I forget to write it down on my palm," shrugged the girl who nearly walked out of the classroom without me.

After a long walk, we had arrived at the mall parking lot. At times

like these, I was really starting to miss Adachi's bike. *Maybe I should save up my allowance and get a cheap one.*

"How come you haven't learned how to ride a bike, Nagafuji?"

"Why bother when I've got Hino?"

"Good point." *I guess that makes sense.*

We passed by the smoking area and entered the building. The plan was to walk around and brainstorm some ideas, but as I looked up at my friend's pretty face, I couldn't help but worry she'd already forgotten what we came here to look for.

"I realize it's a little late to ask, but where's Hino? I kinda figured she'd tag along."

"She said she was busy...or did she?" Nagafuji cocked her head, puzzled. Getting a straight answer out of her was like pulling teeth. But at the very least, this confirmed that she'd remembered our plans long enough to ask Hino about her availability. *Interesting.* So what was it that made her forget?

Ignoring the wine kiosk near the entrance, we headed to the left. There, Nagafuji caught sight of the bakery and stared at it rapturously. Her entire head pivoted in its direction while the rest of her walked briskly forward. *Creepy.*

"Couldn't you just get her a pastry?"

"I *could*, but I'm not going to."

I put a hand on her shoulder and hurried her along. I needed to get her far, *far* away from the purple sweet potato buns.

As we passed by the tea shop, I thought back to the last time I came here. I was with Hino, and Nagafuji was there, too. Then Hino dropped more than 10,000 yen on a whole bunch of tea "for the family," and I was like *damn, girl.*

Leaving this fond memory behind at the tea shop, we continued on to the walkway with a big, festive Christmas tree. Looking at them always filled me with nostalgia for happier times.

When I was little, I'd always find myself tempted to climb to the very top of any Christmas tree I saw. Being up high offered an entirely new perspective on the world around me, and I enjoyed that contrast, so I sought it out wherever I could. Maybe part of me yearned to travel

the world to distant lands. This made some amount of sense—after all, I was so adventurous by nature that I probably seemed like a total fish out of water here in Japan. Yeah...surely I must have sensed it back then.

What was it that made me give up on those dreams of a different world? I couldn't remember, but I could tell it must have hurt. Especially considering the end result was...well, me. This current version of me.

Not that I could do anything about it now.

"So, now that we're wandering around the mall, what's our first stop?" I asked Nagafuji, since it didn't seem like she had a destination in mind.

"Let's see..." Whipping her head around dramatically, Nagafuji took stock of all the nearby display windows. "Maybe she wants a boomerang."

"...What?" *What are you, Australian?*

...Wait, they sell boomerangs here? Where? With the summer appliances, or at the cell phone kiosk?

"Kids love 'em, y'know. They're a lot of fun. But they break easily in the wintertime."

"Oh...right."

I'd forgotten I was using my little sister as a pretext. In her case, maybe she *would* actually want a boomerang. But what was the point of giving one to Adachi? What if she started throwing it at birds for fun?

"I think she'd like something a bit more practical. She, uh...she's very mature for her age."

"Something more *practical*?" Nagafuji repeated to herself.

On second thought, this was the same person whose first gift suggestion was a freaking *boomerang*, so maybe the word "practical" just wasn't in her vocabulary.

"What if you bought her a ten-pack of croquettes from our store?"

"Gee, why didn't I think of that? You're such a good saleswoman."

It was undeniably a practical gift, but they'd just be cold by the time I got home...uh...among other problems.

“Hmmm...”

Scratching her head, Nagafuji set off walking once again. Likewise, I followed along right beside her. *Boy, did I ever pick the wrong person to ask.*

Then she spotted a store selling kitchen equipment, and her eyes settled on a single fish-shaped cutting board. “What about a fishing pole?” she suggested, almost certainly inspired by the fish imagery.

“This is for my sister, not Hino.”

Next, her gaze wandered to the left, toward the display case at a popular confectionery kiosk. “What about some okiagari wafers?”

“Those are more of a New Year’s tradition, don’t you think?”

“Good point.” She promptly shrugged off her own suggestion and kept walking. Next up, we spotted a dry cleaner store and a foot spa with a cartoon bear mascot. “What about a washing machine?”

Wait a minute. “Are you just suggesting everything within sight?!”

“Yup,” Nagafuji nodded without hesitation. Then she adjusted her glasses as if to say *nothing gets past these peepers*. “You know what they say—throw enough mud at the wall, blah blah blah. If I say a bunch of stuff out loud, maybe you’ll have an epiphany, or we can build on our ideas until we come up with something viable. You know, like...what’s it called again? Breast-storming?”

You had me in the first half, not gonna lie.

I could tell that she was genuinely trying her best to help, but I sincerely couldn’t imagine her actually pausing to think critically about her own suggestions. Instead, I was 100 percent confident that she would ultimately forget what she suggested in the first place. Like a comedy bit, except in real life.

“What did you and Hino get each other that one time?”

Thinking about it, I probably should have led with this question.

“I gave her a business license.”

I paused. All at once, I had so many questions: *For what? For where?* Unfortunately, I knew if I tried to ask them all, I’d only wear myself out.

“...Okay, and what did she get you?”

“A Nobel peace prize.”

“...And you were *how old* at the time, exactly?”

“Like, five?”

I never should have asked. Clearly their friendship was beyond all human understanding.

We continued walking through the first floor of the mall, with Nagafuji calling out various gift ideas as they came into view, until she suddenly came to a stop outside one particular store: ZiZé, a boutique that sold clothes, shoes, and accessories. I eyeballed it briefly, debating its potential merits, but ultimately decided against going in—it was a little too much. Granted, yes, Christmas was a special occasion, but this was supposed to be a casual gift for a friend. I needed it to be something Adachi wouldn't feel guilty about me buying.

As I explained my thought process to Nagafuji, she nodded along, though I got the sense she didn't actually understand what I was getting at. Then she started to glance around. *Here it comes... Any second now...*

“Maybe you should go with the boomerang after all.”

Aaaand there it is.

“We're looping back around to that, huh?”

Get it? Just like a...never mind.

“Boomerang, boomerang!” Nagafuji sang to herself, flicking her wrist in an imitation throw.

“I'm starting to think maybe *you* want a boomerang.”

“You're not wrong.”

She patted her ample chest. *Ugh, don't rub it in my face.*

“Don't worry. I have a good understanding of how kids tick.”

“Alas, if only they could understand you, too.”

“Sure they can! I'm a total kid at heart—I order my curry mild and everything.”

“Only because you can't handle anything hotter!”

“*Boooo-merang!*” she shot back nonsensically, swinging her arms and hips. Her expression was still as blank as ever, but at least she was having fun. “If you got her a boomerang, the two of you could play with it together, you know.”

“That’s true...I guess...”

I attempted to picture it: me and Adachi at the park, throwing a boomerang around in dead silence. Oddly enough, it *did* seem mildly fun.

“One person throws it, and then the other can go fetch it! You know?”

“I think you’re thinking of a Frisbee.”

“Let’s just try it out, all right? I’ll buy this one, and then I’ll show you how much fun it is to play with it.”

“Are you moonlighting as a boomerang salesperson or something...?”

Giddy, Nagafuji took me by the hand and headed for the escalators. Meanwhile, I was utterly at her mercy. Frankly, I wasn’t convinced this mall sold boomerangs at all, but then she led me to a sporting goods store on the third floor, and sure enough, there they were. She walked in, grabbed one off the shelf, then walked up to the register and bought it, all without the slightest hesitation.

How long has she had her eye on this thing?

The boomerang was V-shaped (unsurprisingly), greenish-yellow in color, and made of plastic. I could feel the male clerk staring at us. *What, you’ve never seen two teenage girls come in to buy a boomerang and nothing else?* Then again, I estimated about forty percent—no, sixty percent?—of that gaze was centered on Nagafuji’s chest.

She was normally pretty oblivious to most things, but not this, apparently. I could tell because she was scowling slightly. *Poor thing. More titty, more problems.* Not that I could relate...not yet, anyway. *I’m just a late bloomer, that’s all!* As I coddled my own fragile ego, the transaction was completed, and Nagafuji took her receipt. At last, she had her precious boomerang.

The moment we stepped out of the store, she pulled her new toy out of the bag. *You’re not going to walk around the mall holding that thing, are you? Ugh...*

“Now let’s go test it out!”

“Look, uh, I think maybe you’re getting a little carried away with this idea...”

But Nagafuji ignored my reservations and dragged me along regardless. At first I tried to fight it, but then I saw how excited she was to play with this boomerang, and...well...I conceded defeat. In more ways than one. *Sometimes you can fight the current, but other times you just have to go with the flow.* Considering Nagafuji had managed to single-handedly sweep me out to sea, perhaps she was a force to be reckoned with.

We walked through the parking lot to a fountain plaza out behind the nearby beef bowl restaurant. There were no children in sight, possibly because the combination of winter plus water had kept them all at bay. There was, however, some sort of art installation(?) with three silver wires spiraling around each other.

Fortunately, the trees here were few and far between, which was perfect for our purposes. Otherwise I could already see the boomerang getting stuck or broken somehow.

Nagafuji handed me her bookbag, then got ready to make her throw—not horizontally, but vertically, with most of it pointed behind her, like she was trying to touch the other end to the back of her wrist. Then she took aim and flung it hard into the distance with a *whoosh*.

The boomerang glided smoothly to the other end of the plaza, almost like it was carried by the wind itself. By the time it had traveled as far as it could go, it had leveled itself out horizontally. Then it started its journey back home, and at that point, both my eyes and ears were completely transfixed.

When Nagafuji first threw it, there was hardly any sound at all... but as it approached, slowly but surely, I could start to make out a small, arrhythmic sound as it sliced through the air: *whfff, whfff, whfff*. It grew closer and closer, tracing a graceful arc as it flew.

In response, Nagafuji crouched down and extended both hands. As soon as it was within her range, she clapped her hands together to catch it, like a martial artist blocking a sword. Stroking the boomerang like a faithful dog, she straightened up and turned back to me casually.

“This one came back around. That means it’s a good one.”

“Don’t *all* boomerangs come back around? Isn’t that the whole point?”

“You’d be surprised. There are some real duds out there. Anyway, here you go.”

She traded me the boomerang in exchange for her bookbag. I looked down at the plastic green V in my hands. *God, what am I doing? I should be Christmas shopping right now.*

“For your first time, don’t throw it too super hard. Especially since you’re not wearing any protective goggles.”

“Don’t worry. I wasn’t planning to.”

I positioned myself the same way Nagafuji had, then flung it weakly, in accordance with her instructions. Nevertheless, it flew far into the distance, curved, and flew back in my direction. I hadn’t anticipated this, so when it started to approach, my fear of getting hit flared up.

“Eeek!”



Shielding my head with my arms, I crouched down low to the ground. The boomerang flew far behind me and crash-landed at the edge of the park. I jogged over to retrieve it, dusted the dirt off, and walked back. Now that I knew what to expect, I was ready to give it another try, so I flung it a second time.

Once again, in spite of my half-assed throw, it flew surprisingly far. Once it finished its brief excursion, it curved back rather suddenly, almost like it had changed tack on a whim. *Whfff, whfff, whfff*. My heart pounded in time with its soft whirring.

This time around I reached out to catch it, but it bounced off my hand and dropped to the ground. Apparently both throwing *and* catching took a lot of practice to master.

“This is...kind of fun...”

Surprisingly enough, I genuinely enjoyed watching it curve gracefully through the air. Still, I wanted to successfully catch it at least once, so I flung it a third time, much more softly than my previous attempts. But although I angled it more toward the sky, it refused to gain much height. And whereas the last few times it had whipped back fairly quickly, this time it lost its momentum and hit the ground. Evidently the angle of the throw was more important than I realized.

Just like that, I was hooked.

“So, what do you think?” Nagafuji asked, putting a hand on my shoulder. I hadn’t noticed her standing there until just now.

“It’s actually not as bad as I thought it would be.”

“Yay,” she replied in a deadpan voice as she wrapped her arms around me in a hug. I put a hand to her chin and pushed her off.

Meanwhile, I contemplated this potential Christmas present. Compared to a gift of food, which would only last until it was eaten, this sort of toy might actually have more practical value, since she could play with it whenever she felt like it. That said, it still didn’t strike me as entirely...*ideal*. It felt like I was on the wrong track—like Nagafuji had led me astray, almost.

On the horizon, the sun was setting, and the scarlet rays were slowly diffusing their color across the clear, cloudless sky. For the first time in a long time, it felt like I had reunited with my inner child. Each time the boomerang flew out, it arced back with another forgotten

memory from all those years ago.

Spurred on by that nostalgia, I gripped the boomerang and let it fly...all the while hoping it would take me along for the journey.

When I got home, I opened the shopping bag and showed my little sister the brand new boomerang. "What do you think?"

She blinked at me with her big, round eyes. "What is that?"

No excitement. I was starting to think maybe this was a bad idea after all. "You tell me," I replied. Then I started humming the main jingle from a popular quiz show, implying her response time was limited.

She put a hand to her chin in contemplation. Then, once she'd examined the mystery toy from every angle, she reached out and pretended to "buzz in."

"Bing-bong! It's...a clothes hanger without the hook part!"

Well...you're not wrong.

Now I was *really* starting to think this was a bad idea.

Time flew by, and Christmas Day rolled around at last. That day found me staring up at the sky.

People loved to talk about a "white Christmas," but in my experience, it *never* snowed on December 25th. What good were these man-made holidays if the weather wasn't going to play along? Why bother?

But despite my skepticism, I knew full well I *was* in fact going to bother. In the morning I got dressed, fixed my bangs at least twice, and then around 11 AM I went to the kitchen and told my mom I was going out. There, I found my sister eating lunch.

"I'm going out for a bit."

“All right, thanks for letting me know... Got a hot date or something?”

“For the last time, *no.*” *How many times are you going to ask me this, Mother?*

“Where are you going?” my sister asked, whipping her head from side to side as she looked from me to Mom and back, all the while chewing her food. *Settle down, child.*

“I’m gonna go hang out with a friend.”

“Noooo!” she whined. Then she got up from the table and walked right up to me.

“You’ll be eating dinner with us, though, right?” my mother asked.

“That’s the plan,” I nodded. “If I change my mind, I’ll be sure to let you know right away, but I don’t think that’ll happen.”

Meanwhile, my bratty sister started to kick my shin. “Where are you guys going? How come you have to leave?!”

Outside this house she was always a perfect little angel, but when it came to me, she showed no mercy. I smacked her on the forehead and glared down at her. She pouted up at me. *Oho.*

“What’s the matter? Do you want your *nee-chan* to stay home with you?” I teased with a smirk.

She flailed her arms in front of her like she was clearing the air. “Shut up!” she shouted angrily.

“You do, huh?” I replied, ignoring her.

Then I slid my hands under her armpits and lifted her into the air. *Man, she’s gotten heavy. Or maybe it’s just the flailing.*

“I didn’t realize you liked me so much. That’s cute,” I continued.

“Put me down!” she yelled, kicking her little bare feet out. I didn’t know how she could possibly survive in this house without socks, but more power to her.

Sorry, kid, but I’ve got my own life to live.

“I’ll be back before dinner, and then we’ll have cake for dessert, alright?”

As I set her down, she turned away sulkily. Maybe she was mad at

me for treating her like a child, but considering she literally *was* a child, there wasn't much I could do about that. I gave her a quick pat on the head, then headed for the door.

Given her usual bratty behavior, it was nice to be reminded that she still admired her big sister. Would it last, though? Probably not. *I give it another three or four years.*

Still, I appreciated this quick pick-me-up right before I stepped out. Like putting a hand warmer right on my heart to keep me going through the chilly winter. I slipped on my shoes and let out a sigh.

I still didn't know what our plans were for today. What did Adachi have in store for me? She *did* come up with something, right? On second thought, she had the tendency to overthink things... She didn't get any weird ideas, did she...?

Upon further reflection, the latter was looking increasingly more likely.

"I'll just have to wing it."

At the very least, I was planning to eat dinner at home, so I had an idea of what not to get for lunch. That was all the information I had to work with.

Christmas, here I come.

Interlude: A Visit to the Butcher's Shop Part 3

AT MY HOUSE, we always had chicken curry for Christmas dinner. Guaranteed.

“Why curry, of all things...?” Hino wondered aloud, tilting her head pensively as we ate. Despite the holiday, she had once again turned up at my house, just like she did every other day, and my parents welcomed her in like she was family.

“Because they asked me what I wanted to eat, and I said curry.”

“And then they made it with chicken because it’s Christmas. Clever.”

Her cheeks swelled as she stuffed them full of mashed potatoes. The sight of it made me hungry. For curry, I mean, not her cheeks. But I’d be fine with those, too.

“Gimme a bite.”

“Oh, good grief. You get *one* bite, got it?”

Excuse you? It’s my curry! Worse still, she offered me a bite with carrots in it. But I ate it anyway. *Yummy.*

Tomorrow we would eat this curry for breakfast. And probably dinner, too.

“Your curry’s really good, ma’am!” Hino shouted to my mom, who was running the fryer for the store.

“Thank you, dear,” she answered. The heat was making her sweat, even in the middle of winter. “But I’m sure I can’t compete with the food at your house.”

Hino laughed awkwardly. “We only ever have Japanese food,” she explained.

I’d forgotten about that, actually. One time, when I went over to her house, they offered me chickpeas and kelp as a snack. I was expecting junk food, so it was pretty wild.

“But on the rare occasion they *do* make curry, they always put freeze-dried tofu in it. I can’t eat that stuff.”

Hino glanced up at the calendar as she ate. The box for the 25th featured one word, written in my handwriting: CURRY. *Why did I write that?* I couldn’t remember.

“Just one week left, and this year will be over. Isn’t that right, Grandma?” she teased.

“Right you are, Grandpa,” I nodded, looking up at the calendar with her.

As a kid I used to get some spending money each year on New Year’s, but that stopped after I graduated from junior high, so I no longer had all that much to look forward to. *I bet Hino’s family still gives her spending money*, I thought to myself enviously. Just then, she turned to look at me.

“Hey Nagafuji, do you ever think about the future and stuff?”

This was an unexpectedly complicated question. “How far are we talking? Tomorrow? Next week?”

“That’s what ‘the future’ is to you? Seven days from now?”

Having finished her food, Hino set down her spoon and took a sip of tea. Then she set her cup back down onto the table and put her chin in her hand.

“Say ten years from now, for example. Do you think we’ll still be sitting around, eating curry at 3 PM on a weekday? No way. We’ll both have jobs—we’ll be too busy. We might not even be friends still. And whenever I think about that stuff...I start feeling like maybe I’m running out of time, y’know?”

Maybe “complicated” was an understatement. Me personally, I couldn’t possibly imagine what my life would be like ten whole years from now.

“Wow...even *you* have your deep moments, huh, Hino?”

“Excuse me? I feel like I should be offended. Care to explain yourself, missy?”

“Hmmm.” I paused to think about it. Something about this conversation offended me, too—the part where she said we might not still be friends. I couldn’t really speak to the rest of the things she said,

but I probably had a response to that part, at least.

Digging through my “fuzzy” memory—according to Hino, anyway; I could remember one instance of her complaining about it, though she insisted she’d said the same thing at least two other times—I attempted to think of something. Faintly, I could make out a vague idea of a reply. *Okay, got it.*

“I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“Huh? What’s fine? Where’d that come from?”

“We’ll be friends forever. That’s what you told me that one time on our way home from the movie theater, remember?”

That was back in second grade, if memory served, though I couldn’t remember what movie.

Hino glanced around nervously, almost like she’d forgotten the whole concept of human speech for a minute. “Um...did I?”

“Yup. And I was like ‘we sure will.’”

“Huh...”

“So I’m pretty sure we’ll still be friends in ten years’ time.” *As long as it’s what both of us want.*

Hino froze for a moment, scratching her cheek. Then she burst out laughing. *What’s the matter with you? Weirdo.*

“Well, we’ve lasted ten years thus far, so I guess another ten won’t be too hard!”

“Hmm?”

“Oh, nothing! Anyway, I want seconds!”

“And I want *you* to go home.”

Our friendship had long since outgrown the usual seasonal formalities...but even if neither of us expressed it out loud, I knew we’d have another fun year together ahead of us.

Chapter 6: White Christmas

ON THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS...I couldn't sleep, so instead I was hunched over on my bed, cell phone in hand, searching myself for the courage to press the Send button on this email. Exasperated, I swept the hair out of my face and looked up at the clock to check the time. My panic intensified. I couldn't really afford to wait much longer.

"Looking forward to tomorrow!"

Was it too much? Would Shimamura feel pressured reading it, or think it was weird? These were the concerns that kept my finger firmly aloft...but if I was going to send this email, then I needed to do it before she went to bed. Otherwise, there was no point in sending it at all.

I tapped four or five times in quick succession, none of them quite firm enough to actually press the button. *God, what is wrong with me?! I* writhed back and forth on my bed, muffling my face in my sheets. I needed to get to bed soon or else I'd end up with bags under my eyes tomorrow, and I did *not* want that.

Just send it already!

If I sent it, there was a chance I might not regret it, but if I *didn't* send it, I would *definitely* regret it. The choice was easy.

Rolling onto my side, I reached out with one finger and hit the Send button like I was unsubscribing from a newsletter. I pressed down on the screen until I saw the button depress. This was followed by a little paper airplane animation: *Message Sent*.

Immediately, I put some distance between myself and my phone. Leaning against the wall, I let out a hollow laugh. Then I sprang up off my bed and pretended to be lost in thought about something else. In my mind, it felt like Shimamura would only reply if I wasn't watching my phone, so I kept my back firmly turned. *Go ahead and write me back—see if I care.*

I sat down at my desk, opened my textbook, read approximately none of it, and closed it again. Then I put my head on my arms and closed my eyes. My legs jiggled restlessly as a haze descended over my

heart and brain—a haze inspired directly by having witnessed Shimamura and Nagafuji hanging out together; a haze of frustration and self-loathing.

I hated the way I always got this sinking feeling in my stomach whenever I was waiting for a reply. I wasn't even that worried about what she was going to say; if anything, I was more worried that she wouldn't answer at all, especially since I knew she wasn't an avid emailer to begin with. Regardless, as I fidgeted with my bangs, I found myself wishing desperately that she would hurry up and write me back already.

Then my phone beeped, and I fell out of my chair.

Scrambling to my feet, I leapt onto my bed and snatched up my phone. Holding it aloft, I rolled onto my back and navigated to Shimamura's reply. I was so nervous, the room was spinning.

"Yeah."

That was it. That was her whole reply.

How am I supposed to interpret this? Is it a "heck yeah" kind of yeah, or a "yeah, I bet, you loser" kind of yeah? This is exactly why I hate sending emails. They're so cryptic.

To be fair, it wasn't Shimamura's fault. Regardless of who sent me this "yeah," I still wouldn't be able to tell what it was supposed to mean. Text simply didn't convey the same emotional information a human voice did...and I wanted that information. I wanted to know more about her.

"At least I'll get to hear her voice tomorrow."

I was getting way ahead of myself. I wasn't even at the starting line yet. At least, that's what I told myself as I climbed under the covers.

A web of feverish heat settled over my skull. Naturally, on the one night I wanted to hurry up and fall asleep so I could fast-forward to tomorrow, my brain was wide awake.

Sometimes I sincerely despise being human.

Thinking back, I'd actually met up with Shimamura here once

before, back in October. I'd stayed up all night with insomnia, only to finally start nodding off in the morning, and as a result, I showed up late.

This time around? Well, I wasn't late, so that was something. I *was*, however, yawning five times a minute. Plus, I was shivering. I knew I was limited on time this morning, but I decided to take a shower anyway in the hopes that it would wake me up. That was a mistake, however. I didn't have enough time to dry my hair completely, so I ended up leaving the house with a damp head. In the middle of winter. Yeah. So much for my plans to get extra dressed-up today.

I was the one who chose our meetup spot: the information center inside the mall building. This wasn't the same mall I bought the tea from, mind you, but this one had its own giant, conspicuous Christmas tree. It would've been all too easy to tell her to meet me there, of course, but that was where *everyone* was meeting up. I went the long way around to sneak a peek in advance, and sure enough, there were a *lot* of couples. Almost like I'd stumbled upon God's personal collection. Unfortunately, none of them were same-sex pairs...but maybe that was to be expected. Yeah, probably.

Once again, I became painfully aware of how abnormal our friendship was. Did it make Shimamura uncomfortable? Did she only agree to hang out with me because she felt obligated? Whenever my mind started to wander, I quickly found myself in a negative spiral for some reason. Maybe it was the lack of sleep. I shook the thoughts away.

Anyway, I chose to put some distance between us and the couples mainly so we wouldn't draw as much attention when we met up...but deep down, I was also kind of hoping a more private setting would make it easier to hold hands. Contradictory, I know. Sometimes it felt like my heart and brain were completely at odds with each other.

As I yawned for the umpteenth time, I thought back to the time we met up in October. Back then, that little blue-haired girl had crashed our date, but today I was crossing my fingers that Shimamura would show up without any additional baggage. It had taken an incredible amount of courage to make today happen, and I did *not* want to share it with a third party.

I checked the time on my phone. I hadn't received any other emails since "yeah" last night, which actually came as a relief, since it meant she hadn't canceled. Our scheduled meetup time of 11 AM was

now just five minutes away.

And when I looked up from my phone, I spotted the very girl I was waiting for.

“Oh, she’s here.”

The instant I laid eyes on her, my heart fluttered ever so slightly in my chest. It was Shimamura, alright—on time and without any third wheels, thank god.

She waved at me. Relieved, I waved back.

“Hey there! Were you waiting long?”

“Nah, I just got here.”

“Liar!” she shot back, pointing at me. “I *know* you’ve been standing here for *at least* the last five minutes. I *saw* you!”

Busted. She’d seen right through me. Truth be told, five minutes was a lowball estimate—my actual wait time was closer to *fifteen*.

Then she broke into a grin, probably enjoying the abject terror on my face. “Relax! I’m joking. Anyway, sorry I took so long.”

She was wearing a jacket with a fur-lined hood over a black flower-print dress and brown boots, and she was carrying her usual bookbag. Her hair was neatly styled, but her roots were starting to show.

Any way you sliced it, this was your average weekend-wear Shimamura—and for some reason, I found it a reassuring sight.

The conversation ended, and we set off together, side by side. A few steps in, however, I was viscerally reminded of the time I’d seen her walking with Nagafuji. By this point it had happened nearly an eternity ago, and yet my mind kept drifting back to it. *Ugh.* I pressed a hand to my forehead.

Then Shimamura turned to me, and I knew it was probably too late to play it cool, but I hastily forced a smile regardless. A very stiff smile.

“Real quick, I have a question I want to ask.”

“Huh? Wh-what’s up?”

Her preamble had me on edge, but I had a feeling I knew what she was going to say next. A smile played at her lips as her gaze lingered on

the clothing concealed under my coat.

“Why are you wearing your China dress?”

“Oh. Right. I get why that might...make you curious.”

Nervously, I tugged the hem down. I had gone out of my way to borrow it from the restaurant where I worked, and although I had it mostly covered with a heavy coat, the edges still peeked out—shiny, bright blue fabric with plum blossoms and bamboo leaves embroidered onto it. Worse, I had paired this eye-catching dress with boring flats. Overall, my outfit was a mess from head to toe, and I couldn’t blame her for commenting on it.

Over the past few days, I had torn myself apart agonizing over what to wear. I even bought new clothes for the occasion, only to decide I hated all of them. But in the end, for some reason, I kept defaulting back to this option. And even if I were to fully comprehend what had led me to this choice, it was too late to turn back.

As I organized my thought process from last night, however, I hit upon one potential reason: because Shimamura had complimented me last time she saw me wearing it. Apparently that was what had tipped the scales... Evidently I trusted Shimamura’s taste more than my own.

“I mean, it’s kinda weird...”

I was already worried about people staring at us, and now this? *Kill me now!* If she would give me fifteen minutes or so, I could run into the nearest clothing store and buy something else!

Meanwhile, Shimamura scratched her neck lightly. “I mean, people might think you’re some kind of poster girl... Oh, but I don’t mind it, personally. I think it’s cute.”

“Nnn...”

“Must be nice to be so pretty,” she continued in a teasing tone. “I sure wish *I* could rock that look.”

She probably didn’t mean it, of course, but regardless, I never knew how to react whenever she called me pretty. Still, I knew it would look weird if she saw me blushing about it, so I decided to hide it. How was I going to accomplish this? No idea. I gritted my teeth to keep my cheeks taut, but it most likely didn’t help.

“I mean, *you’re*, like...way prettier than me, so...”

This was the best reply I could think of. I meant it as a sincere compliment, but it came out sounding like a protest.

“Ha ha, very funny,” Shimamura replied, and right away it was clear she hadn’t taken me seriously.

In the end, all other comments aside, she ultimately approved of my outfit. And if she approved, then that was enough for me. All at once, the lead left my legs, and if I wasn’t careful, I felt like I might just skip off into the sunset. *Don’t get hasty*, I cautioned myself. *The day’s only just getting started.*

“So, where are you taking me?” she asked.

“Well, for starters...the second floor,” I replied, and pointed in the direction of the escalators, located behind the information center. Over the past three days spent scoping the place out and putting together an itinerary of events, I had almost completely memorized the mall’s layout.

As we approached the escalators, my gaze drifted to Shimamura’s free hand, hanging idly at her side. The back of her hand looked pale and cold, but her palm looked soft and inviting...

I glanced around like I was about to shoplift something. Then, once I made sure nobody was looking at us, I lunged for her hand at the speed of light. Meanwhile, the rest of my body froze in position, and my vision went white as my cowardly brain tried its best to disconnect itself from what my body had done. As a result, I grabbed her a little too hard, accidentally bending her thumb the wrong way.

“Gah!” she yelped.

Hastily, I adjusted my grip...but the damage was done. Shimamura scowled at me. *Oh god, I didn’t give her a sprain, did I?!*

“I’m sorry!”

“It’s okay.”

She wiggled and bent her thumb experimentally, but no pain manifested in her expression, so I took this to mean she was fine...but right as I heaved a sigh of relief, she shot me an angry look, and I shrank away slightly.

Looking back, this was quite possibly my first time making Shimamura mad. After all, she was usually tolerant of all my odd behavior. She was *not*, however, tolerant of me hurting her. This was

perfectly understandable, of course, but...I was terrified of making her hate me. It was the one thing I feared above all else.

As she looked at me, standing there petrified with my shoulders hunched up around my ears, her expression suddenly softened in an unspoken "oh, you."

Oh, thank God.

Then she took me by the hand and pulled me over by the wall, probably so we wouldn't block access to the escalator by standing around. The wall was so polished, I could see our reflections, surrounded by fancy stores decked out in all their Christmas finery.

"Look, uh...please don't snatch my hand like that, okay?"

"Okay. I'm really sorry." *But not sorry enough to let go.*

She stared down at our joined hands. Meanwhile, *I* stared at the floor, terrified to see the look on her face.

"You want to hold hands?"

I nodded. "If that's cool," I added. Translation: *yes, please.*

"Didn't something like this happen a while back?"

I nodded again. "I think so," I added. Translation: *yep, it sure did.*

"Hmmm... *Hmmmmmm...*"

She began to mull it over. Clearly she knew the significance of the holiday, and now it was giving her pause. Meanwhile, my brain wrestled with itself, debating whether to retract my request and let go. But if I wanted to be special to her, then I wasn't going to make that happen by doing nothing and staying quiet. My only option was to take action.

My problem, of course, was that I had no way of knowing whether my approach was the right one.

If sending a single email is all it takes to twist me into knots, then maybe holding hands is out of my league, suggested my superego. But it was too late. Even if I pulled my hand away now, it wouldn't change the fact that I had tried in the first place.

We stood there for what felt like an eternity. My ears were getting cold, as were my bare legs under my coat; I cursed myself for wearing a dress with such a high slit. My only source of warmth was Shimamura's hand.

Then her fingers slowly curled around mine.

“Eh, sure, why not.”

Something about this reciprocal gesture hit me hard. I looked up at her, my mouth agape. Then, with her free hand, she pointed her index finger directly in my face.

“But next time, I want you to ask first.”

“Guweegh?!” *There’s going to be a next time?! She doesn’t mind?!*

“What was *that*? Can humans even make that sound?”

She looked at me, her eyes wide. *Ugh, why do I always act so weird around her? It’s gotta be her fault somehow.*

“Kinda sounded like you said ‘green’ or something...”

“Will you drop it already?! Look, um...from now on, I’ll ask first. I promise.”

To be honest, it was a lot less stressful not having to ask, so this new requirement was only going to make it harder on me...but on the other hand, it felt like she was implicitly saying “I don’t mind you doing it as long as you let me know in advance,” which came as a huge relief.

The one downside, however, was that it suggested she had no intention of ever initiating it herself. In my mind, we were like two parallel lines, and I was flailing around as hard as I could, trying my best to intersect with hers.

“Good.” She lifted our joined hands. “Trust me, no one else is going to try to steal my hand away.”

She smiled softly, and I blushed furiously. She had a way of dropping these lines like it was no big deal, and it just...ugh, it drove me crazy! It almost felt like she was rubbing my feelings in my face.

But...I wasn’t the only person in Shimamura’s life. There were others. People like Nagafuji. And yeah, that made me want to get a little bit aggressive in my approach. For a moment, I considered explaining this, but thought better of it.

We walked back to the escalator and stepped on. I was immediately glad we didn’t have to climb the stairs manually, because my legs were now so numb from the cold that I wasn’t confident they would work properly. Shimamura stepped onto the stair below mine, but nevertheless continued to hold my hand.

When we walked off, however, I felt like I could sense the opposite-sex couples staring at our joined hands as they passed. Shimamura didn't really seem to notice or care, but *I* sure did. My shoulders stiffened. The more attention we drew, the more it hit home that the two of us were *holding hands*.

My mind went white. We had now made it to the second floor, but...where was I supposed to take her? My mental notes were a total blank, all my painstaking reconnaissance tossed right out the window. Awkwardly, I dragged Shimamura down the walkway.

Now where was it...? Oh! It was right there, to the right of the escalator landing.

"I...I was thinking we could hang out here...if you want," I stammered.

This was the same amusement center where the three of us had gone bowling. As soon as we stepped inside, the Christmas music playing over the mall speakers was promptly drowned out by an even louder buzz.

"Are we going bowling again?"

"Nah."

If we went to the bowling alley, I was terrified we'd run into that little blue-haired girl again. Hard pass. Instead, I led her past the ping-pong and pool tables to the loudest part of the facility: the arcade.

We entered to find that the place was practically deserted. So what was causing all the racket, you ask? It was the games—the go-kart track, the electronic bingo cabinet, all beeping and blaring loudly to no one in particular. The coin pusher game was decorated in grinning cartoon characters. The sight made my heart ache, the way it did whenever I thought back to all the characters I fell in love with once upon a time, only to watch them slowly fall into obscurity.

We passed by the coin pusher and walked around behind the bingo cabinet to my chosen destination: an air hockey table near the back of the room. It was a bit outdated compared to the other games, and there was another, newer table next to it that offered a "multi-puck mode," but I purposely chose the vanilla version.

"How about some air hockey?"

Air hockey had a lot in common with our favorite pastime, ping-

pong, so I figured it would be more fun than watching a movie...but now that I thought about it, if we sat still in a dark room for two hours, I'd doze off for sure. I needed to keep my body moving to stay awake.

"Ooh, air hockey. Makes sense."

Truth be told...I'd only ever played this game maybe once before. "Wanna play?"

"Sure." She started to take off her jacket, but once the cold air reached her bare shoulders, she shivered and pulled it back on. "Brrrr! On second thought, maybe I'll keep this on until after I've warmed up a bit."

Then she grabbed the orange...racket, mallet, whatever it is...out of the little basket and walked over to the opposite end of the table. Naturally, this meant she needed to let go of my hand. I knew this was coming, and yet I still found myself disappointed.

This air hockey table cost 200 yen per game, so we each put in a 100-yen coin. The puck popped out, and I put my mallet on it to hold it still. Then the scoreboard reset back to 0-0.

Shimamura chuckled smugly. "Go ahead and serve."

That's awfully generous of her... Maybe she's really good at this game. Taking her up on her offer, I reached out and slid the puck over to my side.

And so our game began, here in this empty arcade. Truth be told, I'd scoped the place out in advance to make sure we'd have some privacy...but I wasn't about to tell her that, of course.

I decided to test things out with a light serve—and flinched in surprise when the puck suddenly bleeped at me. *Since when do the pucks bleep like that?*

Naturally, this moment of trepidation didn't get past Shimamura. There was a pleasant, airy *clack* as she knocked the puck back at full speed, hoping to take advantage of my delayed reaction. Unfortunately it missed my goal by an inch and bounced back, positioning itself for a return serve. This time, I sent it back hard; it ricocheted off the side and slid right into Shimamura's goal like I'd planned the whole thing.

"What the...?" she murmured as she leaned down and peered into her goal, her hair bouncing with her movements. Her gaze shifted to her mallet, and she cocked her head pensively. "Weird... This game

doesn't work like I remember."

"What do you mean?"

"I play this game with my sister sometimes. But we have the Mario one, and I think maybe the setup's different."

She tapped the mallet against her forehead. Evidently she was well-versed in air hockey, hence that smug chuckle from earlier.

This time it was her turn to serve. The puck flew out in a straight line. I swung out to send it back, but my mallet failed to connect, instead sliding across empty space. Luckily the puck had missed my goal and bounced back.

Meanwhile, Shimamura stared in surprise at my failed swing—so surprised, in fact, that when I sent the puck back, it slammed right into her goal before she could react. Now I'd scored against her twice in a row. She smiled stiffly.

"I can't believe you distracted me with that feint. Not bad, Adachi."

"Heh...yeah...pro strats," I replied in an attempt at showboating... but it was obvious from my voice that I wasn't really feeling it. She laughed.

I wish I knew what Hino would do in times like these.

Then again, it'd probably be really weird if I suddenly put on some chipper persona. I wasn't deluded enough to believe I could pull it off. With a self-deprecating laugh, I hit the puck once more. And as we engrossed ourselves in this halfway-serious game of air hockey, my mind slowly wandered away, leaving my arm to swing on autopilot.

Who was my first crush again? I couldn't remember, but I was pretty sure it wasn't a girl. Regardless, in a lot of ways Shimamura was "my first."

Maybe I had simply stopped caring about gender when it came to my interpersonal relationships...but that was my own personal choice. To Shimamura and the rest of the world, gender was still very, *very* important. I had the sense to recognize that. Likewise, I understood (albeit reluctantly) that I needed to be discreet whenever my behavior defied societal norms.

But while part of me wished the world would change, another part of me was grateful for the series of circumstances that brought the

two of us together. If it hadn't been so hot during the summer...if summer vacation hadn't lasted as long as it had...if we hadn't bumped into each other up in the gym loft...if we hadn't enrolled into the same high school...if we both weren't so bored of class...then she and I never would have met. But we *did*. And that meant it was fate.

Behind every new encounter were hundreds, thousands, *millions* of tiny choices leading up to that moment. One wrong step and our paths never would have crossed.

But thankfully, I made all the right choices...and for that, I would love myself forever.

"You lied to me, didn't you?"

"I didn't, I swear!"

After six games of air hockey, we moved the party to the Freshness Burger on the first floor, where we grabbed a late lunch. At no point had I planned to choose a fancy restaurant in honor of the holiday or anything like that. It would be awkward to get a table with just the two of us, and if we were splitting the bill, then I'd feel like a jerk dragging Shimamura somewhere expensive.

To be clear, I had money saved up from my part-time job, so I *could* pay for the entire meal, but knowing Shimamura, she wouldn't feel comfortable with it. It was the sort of kindness that was only "kind" if both people actively *wanted* it.

"You totally creamed me," Shimamura grinned as she nibbled on the French fries that came with her combo meal.

In the end, I won 4-2. But I wasn't especially skilled; Shimamura was just really bad. Evidently her past experience hadn't helped much. I wasn't about to say this out loud, of course.

"You know, it's not nice to bully a beginner who doesn't stand a chance against you."

"I wasn't bullying you!" I insisted, flailing my hands. But I knew she wasn't actually mad at me.

"Eh, it was still fun," she shrugged. "You always beat me at ping-

pong, too, now that I think of it.”

“You think so?” I paused to think back, since I hadn’t actually been keeping score.

“On second thought, maybe I had more wins,” she replied jokingly, pretending to mull it over a bit more.

“Hey! Just because I don’t remember doesn’t mean you can make stuff up!”

I pretended to pout, then laughed to myself. Now that we were joking around, my unruly nerves had started to relax. I hadn’t entirely brought them under my control, and I didn’t really know what it was that set them off, but for the time being, all was well. If I had to guess, I’d probably tense up again if I started looking around the restaurant any more than absolutely necessary, but I wasn’t about to test this theory. All I knew was that most of the other tables had opposite-sex couples sitting at them.

You people must really like Christmas, I thought to myself like a hypocrite.

Shimamura sipped her coffee through her straw and glanced out the window at the parking lot. “Feels like it was only yesterday... Four months isn’t really all that long, you know?”

I was inclined to agree. In a way, it felt like we’d never really left the gym loft—I could imagine it clear as day.

“Once we’re second-years... Once spring rolls around, and the weather warms up...do you think you’ll go back up there?” she asked me probingly, gazing deep into my eyes.

To tell the truth, whenever I was up in that loft with her, I felt perfectly at peace. And if I was completely honest with myself, I didn’t want us to fry up there during the summer heat—I wanted us to kick back and relax during the mild spring sunshine.

But that was what *I* wanted, not what Shimamura wanted.

“Nah, I’ll just go to class,” I told her. “Then after school we can come here and play ping-pong upstairs.”

“You get a gold star,” she replied, smiling in satisfaction as she “graded” my answer. “You’ve turned into such a goody-goody!”

Sad to say, she had misread me. Honestly, I was just taking cues

from her.

“Man, we’re gonna be second-years... That means we’ll get assigned to a new homeroom class...” Shimamura mused aloud to herself. She didn’t seem too worried about it, but for me, it was a major crisis.

Starting today, I’m gonna pray to God to put me in the same class as Shimamura again...and in the meantime, I’ll try to brace myself in the event it doesn’t happen.

Not that the two of us talked much during class—or, you know, at all. Still, it was reassuring, having her there within my line of sight.

The two of us were just friends, and yet the thought of Shimamura making other friends behind my back made me sick to my stomach. I hadn’t thought about it until just now, but apparently I was quite the jealous type. Especially since I was still annoyed about the Nagafuji thing. And if we ended up in different classes, Shimamura would start hanging out with other friends more and more... This didn’t anger me so much as frighten me; I was terrified that we would start to drift apart.

We downed the rest of our coffee, then headed out of the restaurant. From there, we returned to the second floor, then sat down at a two-person table near the escalator landing.

Shimamura never did take her jacket off—I guess she never fully warmed up. Now she sat staring into space, idly watching the passersby, her legs stretched out slightly. Every now and then she’d wiggle her feet, and for some reason I found this adorable. There were these fleeting moments in which Shimamura revealed her more childish side, and it captivated me every time.

Then I decided this was as good a time as any, so I took her Christmas gift out from inside my bookbag.

“This is for you, Shimamura.”

I offered her the bag of tea leaves, gift-wrapped in traditional Japanese style. Curiously, she accepted it, then fixed me with a look that said *what’s this about?*

“It’s...you know...your Christmas present or whatever.”

“Whoaaa.” She stared at it in over-exaggerated surprise. Blinking, she held the bag aloft and peered at it from every angle. “Gosh, thank

you! Seriously, I'm really touched."

She scratched her cheek in a rare display of embarrassment, her expression warm and affectionate, then hugged the tea to her chest. Somehow this reminded me of the time I sat between her legs, and the embarrassment spread to me, too.

"Oh, this is that one blend that smells really good! I've been wanting to try it," she exclaimed, beaming, as she read the label. Evidently Hino was right on the money. "How did you know?"

Oh. Right. Come to think of it, I wasn't technically supposed to know.

"Was it a lucky guess or something?" she asked.

"...No," I answered honestly.

She pressed a finger to her forehead and murmured in contemplation as she glanced around, like she was trying to remember something. "I know! Did Hino tell you?"

"Oh, uh...yeah."

"Look at you, Little Miss Thoughtful," she teased, playfully stroking my hair. To me, this was the best return gift I could have possibly received.

I leaned against her hand for more, but she quickly pulled away. *Darn.*

"Who'd have thought we'd both have the same idea, huh?"

"Wait, what?"

"Since you've been such a good girl this year, your *onee-chan* got you a present."

Shimamura pulled something out of her bookbag...but my excitement at the word *present* swiftly died once I saw what it was. I froze.

St. Shimamura has some interesting taste in gifts, that's for sure.

"What is this?"

"A boomerang."

At first glance I thought it was a broken clothes hanger. Confused, I took the blue, V-shaped object from her... *Now what?*

"And here's your protective goggles."

Next, I took the goggles... *Seriously, now what?*

“Am I supposed to wear these when I play with it?”

“Yeah. Oh, but just so you know, I tried it out ahead of time to make sure it was actually fun before I gave it to you, and it definitely is.”

“Cool...”

I wasn't sure what else to say. Not only was I stunned that she gave me a boomerang of all things, I was stunned that she gave me anything at all. I stared down at the boomerang and tried to decide whether I should feel touched.

“I'm really bad at choosing gifts, so I asked Nagafuji to help me... and for some reason, this is what we ended up with. I asked the complete wrong person for advice, huh?”

“Nagafu—oh!”

Then...that explained why I saw them hanging out together at the other mall! Shimamura was going gift shopping for me! Her choice of gift aside, I was honestly flattered—and relieved, now that I knew the truth—and ashamed of myself for getting so jealous in the first place. Sometimes I could be so self-centered.

Staring at the floor, I reached out and put a hand on Shimamura's shoulder, creating a shaky bridge between us.

“Adachi?” I heard her ask, her tone dubious.

For a moment, I was overcome with the impulse to pull her into a tight hug, just to see what would happen if I reduced our physical distance to zero. Unfortunately, I had a feeling that doing so would only push her away emotionally. So instead I held back.

I could feel my cheeks burning; they were probably bright red. Slowly, I looked up at her.

“Thank you, Shimamura. I love it.”



I knew she wanted me to actually use it, but I planned to take it home and hang it up on my wall as a decoration. Even if—on the off chance—we stopped being friends someday...I would never, ever take it down.

“I’m just glad you like it.”

Truth be told, no, I didn’t like it. But I *did* like that she gave me a gift at all. Especially on Christmas. That was enough for me.

“Anyways,” Shimamura continued in her usual tone, scratching her cheek, “wanna go outside and throw it around?”

“...What?”

“Oh, I just figured I’d teach you how to throw it.”

“N—”

On reflex I was going to say “No thanks, I’ll pass,” but I couldn’t bear to wipe the smile off her face. Before I could mentally reshuffle the rest of my plans for the day, however, she set off in the direction of the descending escalator. She was 100 percent serious about playing with this stupid boomerang.

At the end of the day, no one could deny that Shimamura was weird in her own way. But it was that weirdness that brought us together, and that made me happy.

Perhaps that interpretation in turn proved that I, too, was every bit as weird.

I hurried after her and reached for her hand.

“Can I?” I blurted quickly. Then, with her blessing, I grabbed it.

This way I’ll stay warm.

On the opposite side of the street across from the mall, next to the driving school, was a little park devoid of visitors—aside from us, of course. It was winter break, so all the little kids were probably at home playing video games. The rusty playground equipment creaked in the winter wind, half-peeled paint fluttering slightly.

I had never visited a park during the winter, not even as a child.

Per Shimamura's instructions, I took the boomerang out of its bag. Fortunately, by this point my hair had long since dried, and now it billowed in the breeze along with Shimamura's. I watched as she combed her bangs up out of her face.

"First, you position the boomerang backwards," Shimamura explained less-than-confidently, like she'd only heard it secondhand. Then my heart skipped a beat as she took my hand and adjusted my grip.

This boomerang was proving pretty useful already.

"You want to throw it vertically—not upwards, but straight ahead."

Then she stepped away to give me some room, and I wondered idly if I could get away with asking her to come back and explain it all one more time. Probably not.

Belatedly I realized I hadn't slung my goggles on, but it was too late—I had already made my throw.

The blue boomerang took off toward the equally blue sky. For a split-second it seemed to melt into the atmosphere and vanish from sight, but then it seemed to bounce off an invisible wall and spin back my way, making a loud whirring sound as it approached. I reached out to catch it, but it flew right around behind me, landing by the metal climbing dome. I jogged over, picked it up, and dusted it off.

Is this supposed to be fun?

"It takes some practice," Shimamura commented like she was suddenly the world's premier boomerang expert.

"Can you catch this thing?"

"It takes some practice," she repeated. *Sounds like a no.*

Was there something wrong with my form or my angle or something?

"I gotta say, it's pretty surreal to watch a girl in a China dress throw a boomerang," she continued, and once again I became conscious of my chosen outfit. For a while there I'd forgotten I was wearing my cheongsam at all.

I looked down at myself and discovered that my legs were totally showing through the high slits up the sides. Hastily, I straightened my

posture and flung the boomerang to distract from my shame. It followed about the same trajectory as last time, landing behind me once again. I picked it up and stared at it.

Throw, catch, throw, catch. That's all it was to me. Personally, I would've had more fun playing another round of air hockey. Maybe boomerang throwing just wasn't for me.

"Not having fun?" Shimamura asked me.

"Not really," I admitted sheepishly. But she didn't seem all that disappointed.

"Oh well," she muttered. "Wanna go back inside, and I'll buy you something else?"

"No, no, that's okay," I stammered, gesturing with the boomerang. After all, it still had value to me, though not in the way she intended.

Her eyes followed the boomerang as it waved back and forth in my hand. "All right then," she shrugged with a tiny satisfied grin, like a proud older sister. "But we *should* probably go back inside. It's cold out here."

At her suggestion, we headed back to the mall...but something inside me was holding me back, almost like it had me in a chokehold. *She won't open up to you once you're in public again*, it warned me. And it was right, of course. No way could I talk to Shimamura about love or romance when we were surrounded by couples...*so it's now or never*. I wasn't prepared, but I'd just have to wing it and try not to stumble over myself.

"Hey, um..."

I took a step forward, and she turned back to look at me. Then I took her hand, palm up, and cradled it between my own, linking our fingers.

She looked at me in confusion, probably because she wasn't used to someone cherishing her like this. "What's up?"

The significance of the holiday served as a convenient excuse, egging me on. I moved my finger along the lines of her palm like I was searching for something.

"Hey, that tickles," she scolded me.

"Sorry. I just..."

...Love you. I love you, Shimamura. I love you.

My throat tightened until I could scarcely breathe. My lips trembled.

“I just want to be your, um...friend.”

This was the most I could manage with my current level of courage, and I was going to have to settle for it.

“You *are* my friend,” she replied with a baffled smile.

Yeah, I know. But that’s not what I mean.

“I don’t want to be just a regular friend,” I explained. Then I realized the implication of what I said and started screaming internally. My sight blurred.

I knew it wasn’t right to try to measure our friendship, but there was no going back now. I’d just have to try to explain to her what I wanted. I took another step forward.

“I want to be your best friend.”

Promise me you’ll always come back to me, no matter how far you fly.

“My best friend?” she repeated, brow furrowed, like she didn’t quite understand. The longer I looked at her, the more I felt myself getting cold feet, so I decided to blurt it all out and get it over with.

“Yeah, so...uh...whatever I need to do to get there, I’ll do it.”

“Oh...okay,” she replied vaguely. “Hmm.” She frowned.

Then she started to shiver in the cold. She pulled her hood up over her head, probably to keep her ears warm, and for some reason this one tiny (albeit adorable) gesture had me captivated.

“I’m not sure I understand, but...I think it’s good to put in your best effort, so yeah.”

“Yeah.”

She *definitely* didn’t understand; that much was clear. And yet...as I stared down at the ground, Shimamura reached out and stroked my hair. To grant her easier access, I reflexively crouched down—to the point that our faces nearly touched. Wordlessly, she rested my head against her shoulder.

I reached up and clutched the elbow of her jacket like I never wanted to let her go. Then I closed my eyes and leaned my full weight

against her. For a moment, it felt like the boomerang in my hand was carrying us up into the sky. I could still picture it vanishing into the wild blue yonder.

We stood there in silence—two girls alone in a park, embracing, shivering in the cold. It was the perfect moment...to me, at least. Sure, it was no Christmas miracle, but I couldn't possibly ask for more.

Deep down, all I ever wanted was to spend time with Shimamura on Christmas, and that wish was granted hours ago. Today was already perfect right from the start; the rest of the time was simply spent admiring the view from cloud nine. The air hockey, the coffee, the gifts... These were all small steps on the way back down to reality. Granted, I nearly stumbled over the whole boomerang thing, but for the most part, it all went off without a hitch. The day wasn't quite over yet, but I was already confident that it would remain a total success, right to the very end.

As Shimamura ran her fingers through my hair, it occurred to me that my mind was too blank to commit this day to memory. Instead, it would be lost to the snowy haze that had settled over my brain.

A white Christmas, indeed.

Interlude: Yashiro Comes Calling Part 3

“**T**O THE RIGHT!”

“Rolling, rolling, rolling...”

“To the left!”

“Rolling, rolling, rolling!”

“Hey, Ms. Allegedly 600 Years Old, that’s *my* blanket,” my sister scowls as she watches us. Oops.

It’s another cold day in the house, and the two of us are all rolled up like a burrito with just our heads peeking out from opposite ends of my sister’s comforter. I don’t remember exactly when Yachi got here, and I probably won’t notice when she leaves, but for now, we’re playing some kind of rolling-around game.

“Is that fun?” my sister asks dubiously.

“It warms the body,” Yachi explains, flopping around on the ground. She keeps kicking me in the stomach, and it hurts. Rolling her eyes, my sister turns back to the TV. “Cool.”

“Care to join us, Shimamura-san?”

“I may not look it, but I’m actually really busy,” she replies, reclining in her floor chair and staring at the TV screen.

Yeah, well, *we’re* really busy, too! Unlike *you*, we’re not just lying around! But I have to match Yachi’s moves pretty carefully, or else we won’t roll very much. When you roll, you have to start from one end and work your way down the burrito. Then do it in reverse to go back. That’s the trick.

Rolling, rolling, rolling. Rolling behind my sister. Then we change directions and roll over to the wall. Rolling, rolling, rolling. Then we roll over to the window...

“Oh my God, will you knock it off?!”

My sister gets up and puts her foot down—literally. The two of us

try to wriggle free. No luck.

“What’s your problem?” Yachi demands.

“No, what’s *your* problem?” my sister shoots back.

“We are simply keeping ourselves warm.”

“Oh yes, quite simply,” I join in, mimicking Yachi’s voice. My sister sighs, slumping her shoulders in defeat.

Then a sound rings out from high above us.

“Oh, that’s my phone!”

My sister crawls on her hands and knees to her study desk, where she grabs her cell phone. She briefly checks the screen to see who the caller is, then answers. “Hello?”

Then she waddles on her knees right out of the room.

“Hmm...”

“Hmph!”

With my sister gone, I slide out of the burrito, and Yachi follows suit. Together, we sit down on the empty comforter. Meanwhile, Yachi pulls off her scarf—I guess she got overheated.

“Scarves are warm, but rather itchy against my neck.”

“Oh yeah?” I glance over to find that her neck looks a little pink. Maybe she has sensitive skin.

The air is filled with dust and blue sparklies, probably from all the flopping around. As always, Yachi’s bright blue hair is *covered* in these sparklies. I reach out my hand, and one of them alights on my finger like it’s a little blue bug. I slowly lower my hand so it doesn’t fall off, but a few moments later, it disappears...so I reach out and scoop up another one.

Meanwhile, Yachi watches my finger go back and forth, her eyes as wide as saucers.

“What are these things, Yachi?” I ask as I stare down at the little speck. She cocks her head as it melts away.

“I couldn’t tell you. You’d have to ask the person I got my hair from.”

“Huh?”

Every now and then Yachi said some really confusing things. Maybe she meant ask her parents?

“Does your dad have the same hair as you?”

“He doesn’t have any hair at all.”

“Huh...? Like a monk?”

“A what?”

Apparently that’s a no. Is he just bald, then? “What about your mom?”

“No.”

Your mom’s bald, too?! Okay, no, that can’t be right. Hmm... Yachi’s such a mystery. She doesn’t *look* like she’s lying or anything, but I just don’t understand her... Is it because she’s an alien? But she’s right here on Planet Earth! What’s not to understand?

“Very well. I shall reveal my secret to you.”

“Your secret?”

She shook her head vigorously, shaking out more sparklies. “Allow me to investigate the mystery of the glowing lights,” she declares, proudly thumping her chest. Then she coughs—I guess she smacked herself a little too hard—and shakes her head.

With each movement, more and more sparklies fly out. I glance left and right, left and right... There’s no end to them!

After a while she stops and folds her arms smugly. “Impressive, is it not?”

“One time I got 100 out of 100 on my cooking test.”

“Outstanding,” Yachi nods, but it kinda seems like she doesn’t understand what that means. Or maybe I’m just biased because she has blue hair. “In that case, allow me to offer you this... Ouch!”

She whimpers as she pulls out two long strands of glossy, silky hair; they rustle slightly in the heater’s warm breeze. Then she takes my hand, extends my index finger, and wraps the strands around it in a gentle bow knot, like her hairstyle. I wiggle my finger, and it flaps its wings like a butterfly.

Then she points at the bow. “Guess what? That won’t come off until the mystery is solved.”

“No kidding?!”

“Hee hee hee!” she giggles mischievously.

For a moment I’m tempted to test this by tugging on one end of the bow...but then I lower my hand. If it comes undone, I’m scared it’ll be gone forever. I should enjoy it for a little while first.

The butterfly’s wings flap merrily, almost like it read my mind.

“Oh well... I wouldn’t want to loosen it too quick, or else it’ll disappear!” I point my finger in Yachi’s face, and the little winter butterfly bobs along with me, its sparklies the same color as her eyes. “So I hope you’re prepared to stick around, Yachi!”

“Ho ho ho... By the way, who is this ‘Yachi’ of which you speak?”

And so my competition with Yachi began...but to be honest, it was a competition I wasn’t really sure I could win.

Chapter 7: Flawless Thighs

STRETCHING, I looked up at the clock and discovered that the year would end in just ten minutes. I wasn't particularly excited to ring in the new year or anything; I just figured I should probably head to bed soon.

The longer I kept my head raised, the more it felt like the dust would fly in my nose or mouth, so I tilted my head back down.

Up on the second floor, the storage-closet-turned-study-room was so cold it was practically a refrigerator, and it took an incredible amount of willpower to keep sitting here. I was really tempted to curl up under the kotatsu, but at that point I was better off just packing up my textbooks and going back to my room to sleep in my actual bed. *Man, it sucks having to play catch-up.*

Silently I cursed myself for being such a lazy little sloth, like the hare from that one fable. But the one "silver linen" or whatever was that I didn't have too many hobbies to distract me from studying.

"Can't believe I'm *studying* on New Year's Eve. I'm such a goody-goody."

Yawn.

Somehow it really didn't feel like the year was actually ending—possibly because the third semester didn't start until about a week into January. If anything, it generally didn't feel like a new year had started until about April, when the new school year began. Maybe that would change after I graduated from school altogether.

Once it hits midnight, I'll pack up and go to bed, I decided. But right as I picked up my mechanical pencil, my cell phone started to ring. I flinched as the sudden loud noise broke the long silence. Judging from the "rotary phone" sound effect, there was a new email in my inbox.

I dropped my pencil back onto the table and picked up my phone to check the notification. It was from Adachi. *Odd.* She didn't usually email me—if she had something to say, she preferred to say it via phone call.

“Are you still awake?”

That was the full content of her message. At this, I remembered what time it was. That probably explained why she chose to send an email; she didn’t want to run the risk of waking me up.

“Yeah, I’m up.” Aaaaand send.

I probably didn’t need to clarify that, since *any* reply to her email would inherently suggest I was awake, but whatever. I moved to set my phone down, but then it jingled again.

“Can I call?”

Should’ve seen that coming. *Why didn’t you just call me to start with?* I thought to myself.

I started to write her a reply to let her know I didn’t mind, but then it occurred to me that I could just skip that part and call her myself. I closed the email draft and navigated to my contact list to look for her number. Naturally, I found it pretty swiftly.

I hit the Call button and began to wait.

As I listened to the ringing, I could feel my upper body going numb from the cold, so I slid in deeper under the kotatsu. Adachi picked up by the time my shoulders slipped under the blanket.

“Hey, it’s me. Sure, you can call,” I said before she could get a word in edgewise.

After a beat, she laughed. “This is weird. You don’t normally call me.”

“Yeah, and *you* don’t normally send emails, but here we are. Anyway, what’s up? Something urgent?”

“No, no, nothing like that. I just, uh, wanted to chat.”

“Just wanted to chat, huh?” I rolled onto my right side and laid my phone over my left ear. I could hear the TV on downstairs—apparently my parents were still awake.

“Were you watching TV or something?” she asked.

“Maybe.”

“What do you mean, maybe?”

For some reason, I didn’t want to tell her that I was studying. I guess I didn’t want her to think I was a goody-goody. Stupid, I know,

but a lot of the kids at my school were like that. Maybe it was just one of those “being a teenager” things. For some reason the concept of “trying hard” was majorly uncool. By contrast, effortless accomplishment was way more impressive.

“Hey, so, guess what,” I told her.

“What?” she asked.

“The year’s ending in, like, ten minutes.”

“Oh, yeah, I know. Does your family do stuff for New Year’s? Go see your relatives or anything?”

“We usually visit my grandparents for a bit, but that’s about it.”

“Do you get New Year’s money?”

“Oh yeah, that... Yeah, I think so.”

I rolled over again—I just couldn’t seem to get my head in a comfortable position. I needed something bigger and firmer than this wimpy cushion...something like... Yeah, something like Adachi’s thighs.

“Shimamura?”

“Oh, sorry. I was just thinking about your thighs.”

“Wh...what? My...thighs...?”

“What can I say? They’re really nice.”

“Oh...uh...cool? Yeah, that’s cool... Ha ha...”

“Anyway, back to what you were saying about New Year’s money—hello? Adachi? Are you there?”

I could hear this weird thumping on the other end of the line, like she was punching a pillow. Or was she flailing around on her bed like a beached fish? Before I could stop myself, my mind conjured an image of Adachi with fins and gills.

“What’s going on?”

“Well, I mean...you...”

She fell silent right before she got to the good part. *Quit groaning under your breath and just tell me!*

“Yeah? What about me?”

“You... You’re the one making inappropriate comments about my body!”

“What? How was any part of that inappropriate? I was just telling it like it is.” *Trust me, anyone would compliment your thighs.* “So anyway, you were saying? About New Year’s money?”

“Oh, that... Nah, don’t worry about it.”

“Well, okay...” *Then what do you want to talk about?*

Silence fell between us, and all I could hear was the sound of Adachi breathing. This was what I hated most about phone calls—the awkward transition period of trying to figure out what to talk about, or else forcing the other person to pick up the slack. It just wasn’t fun for me.

“...What made you think of my thighs?”

“Oh, we’re going back to that now?”

“You’re the one who brought it up out of nowhere!”

Yeah, I guess I did. And to be fair, if Adachi suddenly started to...I don’t know, recite a poem extolling the virtues of *my thighs*, I’d probably be a little freaked, too. *I wonder what sort of poem she would write, though.* Knowing her, it’d probably be really cutesy.

“I was just laying here, wishing I could use your thighs as a pillow again.”

“Oh...uh...you were?”

“I was, yeah.”

I got the sense she wasn’t really sure what to say to that. Fair enough.

I slid the cushion out from under my head and pressed my cheek directly to the cold floor. The temperature difference was nice and refreshing. Then I stared at the strands of long hair splayed out around me and contemplated bleaching it again, because lately my roots were starting to show. Alternatively, I could let them grow out, since my family hated my bleached hair...but then I’d look like an overcooked flan.

“Which do you prefer: soft or firm?” Adachi asked suddenly.

“Huh?” *What kind of question is that?*

“I’m talking about thighs. Do you like soft thighs or firm thighs?”

If I tell you, will you change yours to match? Is that even possible?

Why would you do that for me?

It felt like I was at a ramen restaurant and they wanted me to choose what kind of noodle I wanted: *regular or extra-thick*? Then I pictured what Adachi would look like if she skipped everything *except* leg day. Barbie from the waist up, Hulk Hogan from the waist down. *Okay, no, that's too mean.* I shook the image from my mind.

I had to be careful what I told her, or else she might take it to its logical extreme.

“Umm...I think yours are fine just the way they are.”

And so I chose to uphold the status quo.

There was a pause, and then...

“Okay. I'll try not to gain any weight.”

“I don't think you have to worry about that. If anything, you're too skinny.” I was totally jealous, to be honest. *Maybe I should skip the rice cakes this New Year's.* “Oh yeah, and thank you for the tea! I'm really enjoying it.”

“Cool, cool. I've been, uh, using my gift, too.”

What was that pause? Using it how? To hunt stuff, or what?

“Oh hey, it's midnight!”

At this, I looked up at the clock. Sure enough, it was midnight—almost exactly midnight, in fact. The second hand was only two or three notches in. *Wow, that was perfect timing,* I thought. Or was she simply watching the clock the whole time?

“Shall we do the honors?”

“Sure.”

I crawled out from under the kotatsu and shifted into a formal kneeling position. Meanwhile, Adachi got started ahead of me:

“Happy New Year, Shimamura.”

“Likewise. Happy New Year, Adachi.”

I bowed to the empty space in front of me, and if I had to guess, Adachi was probably doing the same thing.

With this New Year's tradition now complete, I slid right back under the kotatsu without missing a beat. At this point, I wasn't confident I could make it all the way back to my bed on the first floor.

The whole house was *freezing*.

“Here’s to another year and all that.”

“Yeah.”

The conversation died again. Then I heard the TV switch off downstairs—my parents were probably heading to bed. Now I was engulfed in silence from every direction.

“Okay, well, I’m gonna head to bed,” Adachi announced, and I found myself mildly grateful that the call was coming to an end. Soon I would be free from this discomfort.

“Yeah? All right, cool. Sweet dreams, Adachi.”

“Sweet dreams... I like that.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, uh, nothing!”

Just like that, her voice retreated into the distance, and the call ended.

Lately Adachi seemed really restless for some reason. *Settle down before they write “fidgety” on your report card*, I joked to myself silently. Then I set my phone down.

“Maybe she just wanted to wish me a happy new year,” I mused aloud, contemplating her motives...then thought better of it. *Why do I always have to psychoanalyze her every move? I should really try to stop doing that.*

Was this what she meant by “being my best friend”? Going out of her way to be the first person to wish me a happy new year? Or just putting me first in general? What was a “best friend,” anyway?

“You’d think it’d be more straightforward...”

After all, it wasn’t like I had a whole wealth of friends to choose from. She could be my “best friend” without even trying. Then again, if I tried to tell her that, I got the feeling she wouldn’t be too happy about it.

Maybe her idea of “best friends” was on an entirely different scale from mine.

To me, your best friend was someone who would walk with you to the local mini-mart or something—a pretty low bar, in other words. By

comparison, I got the feeling hers was astronomically high. Maybe that was why some of her behavior struck me as odd—because she was aiming for a goalpost that was entirely beyond me. *Ugh*. Exactly what sort of lofty expectations did she have for me?

That said, our friendship was a step beyond normal, and it wasn't about to change anytime soon. If we couldn't sprout wings and take flight, then we'd just have to walk on our own two feet, no matter whether the road ahead was familiar or foreboding. And if the path was too treacherous to walk alone, then at least we had each other. Misery loves company, and all that.

"Let's work hard to make this year the best one yet," I muttered aloud, though the call had long since ended. Filled with a strange sense of satisfaction, I closed my textbook. "Or not."

Evidently my level of motivation was dubious at best.

Chapter 8: Chest Contemplation

THE WAY I FELT ABOUT Shimamura's chest was a surprisingly good litmus test for my feelings toward her in general.

Ten minutes into the new year and the first thing I found myself thinking about was Shimamura's boobs. It sounded like a joke on paper, but it was actually a lot deeper than you might expect.

The question was: Did I want to see her boobs?

Obviously I had never seen her naked, or even in a swimsuit, since I hadn't taken part in swimming lessons at school...but did I want to?

"Hmmm..."

Kneeling on my bed, I pressed a finger to my temple and ruminated on this. Ten minutes ago we were talking on the phone. I bet she'd never guess I'd be thinking about her boobs right now.

I could hear the clock ticking loudly with each passing second—the same clock I'd watched like a hawk during the minutes leading up to midnight.

In my mind's eye, I imagined Shimamura in her school uniform. Then I imagined her without her jacket. At this point I already felt like a creep, and I despised myself for it, but kept going regardless. Next, I imagined her without her shirt on—just a bra.

Come to think of it, in the locker room I'd once caught a glimpse of her wearing a green... *Look, it doesn't need to be that accurate!*

But this next step was where the trouble started. Did I want to see what she looked like without her bra on? If yes, then I was almost certainly in love with her...which was a problem in and of itself. A big problem, maybe, if our parents found out. And if I told Shimamura I wanted to touch her boobs, then she'd get super creeped out, and I really wanted to avoid that if possible. Hence, here I was, up to my eyeballs in introspection.

Believe it or not, so far I was actually surprisingly level-headed about this. It was a little anticlimactic.

I could confirm that I didn't feel any disgust or revulsion toward the idea of seeing her boobs, but at the same time, I couldn't detect any active enthusiasm, either. Admittedly I hadn't paid a lot of attention to them thus far. That seemed like a pretty good indicator of my relative interest level.

I probably just wasn't interested in her in that way. Yeah, definitely not. *Weird... I guess I'm just a normal girl after all.* This came as a huge relief, actually, because for a while there it *really* didn't look like that was the case.

I collapsed back on my bed and stretched out. *Nah, I don't see her that way.* I smiled as I stared up at the boomerang on my wall. This revelation was so freeing. Now I could rest easy knowing my feelings for Shimamura were pure and platonic. I had nothing to be ashamed of.

I thought back over tonight's phone call, a stupid smirk plastered on my face.

"Sweet dreams... I really like that..."

I didn't really have a reason why. It just warmed my heart, that's all. I found myself wishing I could hear it every night.

When she brought up my thighs out of nowhere, however, my heart nearly stopped. At the time, I immediately sat up in bed and started feeling up my own legs through my pajamas. And if she liked them the way they were, then I'd just have to make sure they didn't change—no additions, no subtractions. But how would I manage that? Measure them regularly or something?

I rolled over onto my stomach and buried my face into my pillow. *Yeah, I could do this to Shimamura's chest, no problem.* After all, I was just a...normal...girl...

"Bury my face...into her chest...?"

I jumped up. The room was spinning. *Oh god, why do I feel so humiliated?* My cheeks were so hot, it made my head hurt. I didn't even know that was possible.

"Wha...wha...?!"

Clutching my face, I struggled to process this. *Why am I burning up like a furnace?*

Once more, I envisioned Shimamura in my mind's eye—not naked, but dressed in her winter uniform. Then I focused on the modest

swell of her breasts beneath her clothes...and imagined leaning my face close...until I was right up against her cleavage.

Then I recoiled—both in my mind and in real life. I sat back on my rear as my face boiled beet red. If this was a cartoon, I'd probably have steam gushing from every orifice.

“That can't be right...”

Naturally, I didn't know what her boobs felt like. I knew what *mine* felt like, you know, washing them in the shower and all that, but they weren't anything special. And yet here I was, freaking out over the mere *thought* of touching someone else's? *What happened to being a normal girl?!*

This time I imagined myself reaching out with my hand. Reflexively, I squeezed my eyes shut...which didn't change anything, since this was taking place in my mind. Pursing my lips, I envisioned pressing my hand against Shimamura's chest. Instantly, I bolted upright.

I was jumping around so much, there was dust flying everywhere. As I gazed up at it, I slowly realized that this was more than just a “burying my face” thing.

I couldn't touch her at all.

Not literally *couldn't*, but *shouldn't*. If I was overreacting this badly, then clearly I...wanted to touch them? Even though I didn't care about looking at them? *How does that work?*

“Oh god, what? What's wrong with me?!”

I clutched my hair. This wasn't normal at all. This was a problem. A huge problem!

I should have quit while I was ahead. Why in God's name did I keep digging? Now I've made a discovery I can never take back!

Okay, calm down. I just need to sleep on it. Come tomorrow morning, I'll realize I don't actually feel that way at all...right?

Just when I was finally starting to feel normal, my stupid brain yanked the rug right out from under me, and now I was getting all worked up over nothing.

“Well, that totally backfired. Great.”

I had dug my way out of prison, only to wind up in a different, worse prison.

It seemed I would be agonizing over Shimamura for another year to come.

Afterword

OKAY, I JUST DECIDED: If this was *Shounen Ashibe*, Adachi would be Goma-chan. Now read the rest of the series imagining a tiny Adachi tucked under Shimamura's arm.

Honestly, Goma-chan's still really cute after all these years, so I totally understand how Sakata feels.

Now that I think about it, which one of these girls is the protagonist?

Ahem! Hello there, Iruma here. No relation to Iruma City, though. Sorry if you were hoping I was the town mascot or something.

Lately I've been playing a lot of *Minecraft* for the Xbox 360. Right now I'm thinking about crafting a giant statue of a girl wrapped up in a futon—say, who does that remind you of?—so I've been collecting a lot of blue and purple wool. This game is great—it lets you explore underground ravines, seafloor caves, all the sorts of places adventurers dream of. (Though, I admit the graphics made me motion sick at first.)

Also, completely unrelated, but I've been getting back into *Nier* lately, and I finally realized that Yonah's voice actress also voiced Touwa Meme. Crazy, right? Not sure what the connection is there... They're both little sisters, I guess!

I'd like to thank my father—a delusional man who thinks my "autobiographical essays" will make him famous, something I'm not sure is possible considering I haven't written any. I'd also like to thank my mother—a kindhearted woman who yells at her kindhearted son, "Don't you dare write about me!"

To my readers: thank you for sticking around for Volume 2. Not sure if there will be a Volume 3, but if so, I hope to see you there.

—Hitoma Iruma



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